

Romans chapter 9

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Introduction

In this paper I want to analyse Romans chapter 9 (in fact up till chapter 10 verse 4), verse by verse, in order to carefully follow the logic of Paul's argument. I hope to follow this paper up with a document analysing Romans 10 & 11 at some point in the near future, however I feel that once the hard work is done in understanding chapter 9, the interpretation of chapters 10-11 follows much more easily.

This section of Scripture is notoriously challenging. But my suspicion is that this is not purely because of the verses themselves, but rather, in larger part because of the approach we typically take: the "round" hole into which we have been incessantly trying to shove these "square" verses for so long. After this, I believe it is then also because of a lack of attention to the flow of the argument so far in Romans, and lack of insight into how the historical situation in which they were written might affect their meaning.

In my experience, these three issues are usually the key problems when the Bible says things that are "very difficult to understand," and when our explanations become convoluted. Most often the main reason why "difficult" verses are difficult (which then drives the other two issues), is precisely because they would change our global doctrinal thesis from round to square, but we just don't want to change it. This impetus to find a certain, status quo outcome dulls our senses when it comes to truly following the argument and theme of the book through, and also when it comes to picking up the nuances of the situation that is being addressed.

I believe that there is probably no more typical example of this "status quo" response than with the Calvinist approach to the verses at hand. This is because, in my experience, they are the last-ditch defence for the idea that God sovereignly and unilaterally "works faith in the heart of the believer" – and that the choice of faith is therefore not "from us" in any respect.

Admittedly, some of these verses really do appear to make this case on first reading, if divorced from their context. With all the talk of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, and then seeming to say he has the right to, if he so wishes, you can easily see how the doctrine came about. But then, I observe that even strong Calvinists find these verses confronting, and would probably rather go elsewhere to prove their point if possible.¹ These verses seem to fulfil the role of the big ugly men with no neck, standing in the smoke-filled back room, ready to answer the call only if gentler methods don't work.

But is "God sovereignly working faith in the hearts of individual believers, and sovereignly hardening the hearts of individual unbelievers" what the section is on about? Is this passage describing a scene as follows?

"Come take a look - God is deliberately hardening the heart of this guy over here, and that girl over there, and now...several hundred others around them... Its a pity about that, that they will all be punished, and for all eternity...but now look, over there! He has decided to work faith in the heart of two *very* lucky people in the crowd, through giving them the Holy Spirit." (Without showing favouritism of course, because we know that God doesn't show favouritism).

Personally, now, I don't think so. But let's look at the historical context of the passage, and the flow of the argument it sits in, and see what we find.

¹ I suppose it is also true that non-Calvinists find the section confronting. I think it is difficult for everyone.

Historical context

The historical context of this passage seems to be the dire situation of the Jews. They had caused so many riots in the Middle East, and had just been expelled from Rome (under Claudius) for their disturbances there, and then finally let back in at the beginning of Nero's reign. But they were now still causing so much trouble – in fact the trouble was escalating, (as it would continue to do until full-on war erupted a few years later). From a Roman point of view, and also from a Gentile Christian point of view, it probably seemed clear by now that they were about to really cop it if they kept on going like this. It was like watching a car careering off a cliff.

We also see from the New Testament accounts that there was indeed massive unrest amongst the Jews in Palestine, which was spilling over into the church in various other places where there were Jewish communities. In 1 Timothy and Titus, written at around the same time as Romans, Paul mentions bringing the unruly Jews of these congregations into line by very firm measures.

But also in this period, there was a great burst of growth and faith in the Rome church, amongst the Gentiles, news that was joyfully reported throughout the whole world (Rom 1). The Rome church was growing to the extent that these Christians were a hated but significant minority in society, large enough to seem a threat, and so be falsely blamed for the fire of Rome by Nero only a few years later, with thousands exterminated as a result. Much of this growth must have occurred while all the Jews had been expelled from Rome for their disturbances. These disturbances, by the way, seemed to be caused not only by their rebellious nationalistic aspirations, but also by their antagonism towards the Christians, according to comments by the Roman historian Suetonius.

In the period of writing Romans (the spring of AD 58 many commentators believe), it seems that Jewish Christians had been returning to Rome after the edict by Nero allowing this, and this was bringing many questions and issues to the surface about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. It was also raising issues and debates about the relationship between God and the Jewish nation.

It doesn't feel like such a big issue today, after 2000 years of retrospect, but back then Gentile Christians would have wanted to know about why the Jews were constantly in this unruly self-destruct mode, and how this related to them being God's so called "chosen people." What about all the promises about Israel being blessed in the Old Testament? Had God simply changed his mind about them - just given up on them? Is that why He was letting them accelerate, full speed, off a cliff? This little pip-squeak procurator in the Middle East called Israel, overrun with unruly people shaking their puny little fists at the might of the Roman Empire - which could squish them like a bug any time it pleased – *what in the world* were they thinking? And what did God's Old Testament promises have to do with the situation?

In summary, their questions would seem to be about how or whether God is being faithful to the Jews, and also about why they are acting like this. Perhaps some Gentiles were also being brash and arrogant towards the Jews re-entering the church in Rome, saying that God was completely finished with *all* of Israel, a point he will address later.

The flow of the argument in Romans up to chapter 9 verse 5.

Before we get into chapters 9-11, we need a very brief synopsis of the argument of Romans so far.

Rom Ch 1-Ch 3:20 The sin of, and need of all humanity for salvation – whether Jew or Gentile

Rom Ch 3:21 – Ch 4 Salvation through believing the promise, not through obedience to law

- Rom Ch 5** The freedom we have - even through suffering, because of our sure salvation in Christ. Paul also sets up some parallels and opposites between Adam and Christ - between the situation of sin and death in Adam, and then forgiveness and glory in Jesus.
- Rom Ch 6** Objections answered – no, this way of salvation will not lead to more sin
- Rom Ch 7** Illustrations of the transition from law to faith, including within Paul’s own life (implications for Jew and Gentile alike)
- Rom Ch 8** The glorious Christian life: God is for us now, nothing can separate us from his love.
- Rom Ch 9:1-5** But the Jews, who should have got all of this, have missed it² – how tragic!

So again, all of this begs a question: Did God’s promise fail? Why didn’t the nation of Israel – God’s chosen people - receive the inheritance he promised them?

If you doubt that the context of Romans 9 is the argument that the community of those who believe God’s promise are his people, not those who rely on law - because all are sinners who can’t measure up to law; then please take the time to read the following passages.

Rom 1:5,16-17; Rom 3:9-30; Rom 4:3, 5, then (especially) 4:9-16,18,24; Rom 5:1,9,12...

But really this argument is so much of the book so far, and the logic presented for it is so tight, that it probably makes more sense to specify the very few (if any) verses that *don’t* make this point or somehow contribute to this argument. At *every* point, man’s wilful trespassing of God’s law is the ubiquitous problem, and at every point, Christ’s death, through faith in its power, is proven to be the *only* solution.

So returning to our text, Paul’s argument in chapter 9 verse 6 to chapter 10 vs 4, addresses the inevitable question of why God’s promise to the Israelite nation may have *appeared to* fail. Then chapters 10 and 11 follow on in canvassing different aspects and implications of the situation.

Paul’s key central idea, driving the agenda of these chapters is: “No - God’s promise didn’t fail, because the ones who rejected Christ are *not* children of the promise, so they are not true Israelites. True Israelites *are* children of the promise, *are* part of the community of people who believe God’s promise.”³

So in Paul’s argument here, not all who are descended from Abraham are Abraham’s true descendants – *even* in the Old Testament. People who are born according to God’s promise, and who believe God’s promise, symbolise the faithful *generally* in the Old Testament. Ultimately, those who personally have faith in the promise of God in *Christ*, to whom all of these Old Testament promises pointed, are seen to be Abraham’s true descendants now.

² Obviously with the exception of the Jews who became Christians, such as Paul himself, as he will mention later.

³ This is the great community of witnesses to God’s faithfulness, spanning all ages in history and all nations. We know from reading the entire Bible, that this community included the most unlikely characters. Moabites such as Ruth, and Gentile prostitutes such as her mother-in-law (on Boaz’s side), Rahab were in there along with faithful Israelites and prophets of God. It included Ninevites such as those who believed the preaching of Jonah, Galileans and tax collectors who believed the preaching of Jesus, and uncircumcised folk who believed the preaching of Paul. It is an invisible and timeless community of people believing God’s promise in their situation, a promise which was always pointing to, and always ultimately about Christ, and his eternal kingdom. (This point is also made eloquently in Hebrews, especially in chapter 11.)

Detailed arguments supporting this thesis from chapter 9 verse 6, onwards

His supporting arguments for this idea, in detail, are:

Vs 6-9

“Through Isaac your offspring will be reckoned”

The point here is that Abraham’s line of offspring was reckoned through Isaac, *not* through Ishmael, who was born of Hagar the slave woman.⁴

Because the promise was: “at the appointed time, *Sarah* will have a son.” (my emphasis).

Background: Hagar and Ishmael were sent away, and enjoyed none of Abraham’s inheritance. Although Ishmael was descended from Abraham by blood, he had no inheritance in Israel. To add to the analogy, he was characterised by antagonism towards Isaac, and general rebellion.

Isaac, however, lived by faith – patiently trusting God with issues regarding his wife, the land of promise etc. So within the descendants of Abraham, even at this early stage, there is a division between those who receive his inheritance, and those who don’t, and the distinction is *not* about blood relationship to Abraham. It’s a distinction that refers to the promise of God, and faith.

Vs 10-13

“The older will serve the younger” re. Jacob and Esau. In this next generation, there is another example of a divergence between two physical descendants of Abraham – of whom one would have a share in Israel, and the other would not.⁵

Again, the point made is that the child of the promise, who wrestles with God for the blessing out of his faith, and who values the promise made to his forefathers - receives the inheritance. By contrast the heir is *not* the one who perhaps seems the natural heir, but who turns to the flesh and worldliness, and who despises his inheritance. Esau then becomes Edom, a nation that later symbolises fleshly reliance and antagonism towards the people of God (Ref. Malachi, Obadiah).

King Herod in the first century, by the way, is also an Edomite - a descendant of Esau, by blood first, but then ultimately and more importantly by his worldly antagonism towards God’s kingdom. He expresses his faithless antagonism towards Christ by his willingness to see him killed. So the echoes of Edom continue on into the New Testament.

God’s purpose in “election” or “choice” in this passage regarding Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau

4 He was also, importantly, born according to the faithless, fleshly approach of “let’s make it happen ourselves, since God doesn’t seem to be doing much.”

5 It is hard to conclude that Esau was hated individually by God, because the Bible relates so many positive things about him in his later life, things that are at odds with the pattern of enmity between Esau’s descendants (Edom) and Jacob’s descendants (Israel) that develops over time. Esau repents of his decision to kill Jacob, and totally forgives him, even though Jacob himself knows that he has greatly wronged Esau through his deceptiveness. Jacob compares Esau’s face to that of God because of the grace that Esau shows him, something which also shows Jacob’s faithful understanding of God himself at this point. So Esau as an individual in some ways becomes a “type” pointing to the gospel of grace itself, and to the message about God’s love for us, despite our sin. At Isaac’s burial, they are both there burying him together, reconciled to each other, with no judging tone of Esau at this later point, so I see no reason to insert negative assumptions about his eternal destiny. I therefore conclude that what God “hated” was the worldly despising of a God-given inheritance, an attitude that characterised Esau earlier in his life, and also the attitude of wanton pride, self-reliance and antagonism towards God’s people, that characterised the nation that came from Esau, namely Edom. The inheritance in Israel at stake for Esau as an individual in this example was therefore only the symbolic, physical, national one, and not ultimately the real and eternal inheritance of heaven.

- is that God chooses *the child of the promise*, the one who will be faithful, and who will be symbolic of the approach of “having faith in God’s promise.” The passage is designed to make this point, rather than a point about God’s sovereign injection of personal faith into individual unbelievers, which doesn’t relate to the flow of the argument at all. Paul is saying that Esau’s way is the way God hates, the way of self-reliance and worldliness. He is not saying that he pre-emptively chooses one individual over the other per se, or that he withholds faith from one while giving it to the other. Rather, it seems he uses *their* choices regarding his promise, and *his* foreknowledge of these choices, and the outcomes that he engineers as a result on the national scale, to make a point for all time, for all of us. He makes a universal point about God’s election of the faithful – of those who believe his promise, and his rejection of those who turn to the flesh and human effort.

The fact that all of the characters in the accounts are weak and sinful in many ways, and that we can’t say much in their defence in terms of their “works,” underlines the point that salvation is not through measuring up to law. The fact that God chooses the sinners who trust his promise, and rejects the sinners who rely on the flesh, shows that *faith in the promise* is the only thing that makes the difference, once God’s grace is first made available.

The point of all of this discussion so far then relates, on one hand, to the situation of the unruly, unfaithful, antagonistic Jews of Paul’s day, who - like Ishmael - were persecuting the church, and rebelling against all instituted authority. They also were trying to “make God’s kingdom happen” - thus bringing on a sense of inevitability of their ultimate destruction by Rome. On the other hand, it reminds us of the fruitful, promise believing, but nonetheless sinful Gentiles of the Rome church at the time Paul writes. These were sinners who were chosen and saved through faith in God’s grace.

So again, in relation to why Paul writes this section, the temptation may have been to wonder why they – the Gentiles - were receiving such favour with God through the gospel, and why the original “chosen people,” received such trouble, and such a terrible imminent destruction. The answer is that they – the Roman Gentile (along with a few Jewish) Christians, are the children of the promise, and the majority of the Israelites in question, who rejected Jesus and his way of faith, are not.

Vs 14-15

The question comes - is God unjust?

I believe this refers to the question of God choosing the children of the promise and not the children who rely on the flesh. The answer is a clear “No!”

Why? Because God has compassion on whom he wants. If he wants to save the people who believe his promise, and not the nation that tries hard to obey, but fails to believe, he can do that.

If this question about God’s justice had been about why God chooses certain *individuals* and not others, it would be harder to say no so clearly, and his following statements also wouldn’t convince very many that God was just for doing this.

Regarding the interpretation I am proposing - it is *still* a common error to think God is unjust for saving those who simply believe his promise. Even today, many people in the community are offended by the concept of the gospel – that we can *know* that we are saved as Christians, and yet also know that no one is good enough in themselves. They find it impossible to grasp, because it defies the usual logic of measuring up to law.

The concept of “measuring up to law” requires that we divide people into “righteous law-keepers”, and “heinous law breakers,” but the concept of “salvation through faith” openly defies this accepted wisdom

by saying that we are *all* heinous law breakers. As a result, the only way of salvation for such sinners *has to be* by God's grace, which God says is simply through *believing* his grace.

But nonetheless, people like to believe that good people (like them, hopefully – but never very confidently) go to heaven by trying hard and being good, and sinners go to hell by messing up and being bad (really bad that is, much worse than them.)

But in this passage Paul relentlessly asserts here that God has a right to defy our law-based logic if he so wishes, by saving those who *believe* - and he is not unjust for doing so. What he is, however - is *merciful*.

Vs 16

It doesn't therefore depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. People who believe the promise don't deserve salvation – and have done nothing worthy of receiving it. All that they have done is believe God's promise, that they *have* salvation through Jesus, which is doing nothing basically – nothing whatsoever to boast about. They didn't *do* anything, didn't *give* anything. They probably didn't so much as *blink!* All they did was *receive*, through their faith. Receiving is what faith *is* by the way. They are saved by God's grace, his decision to be kind and forgiving to those who believe – those who *receive* his grace, who accept it.

“Man's desire or effort” here refers to man's earnest desire to please God, through his effort to live up to God's standard. This refers back to Paul's discussion in ch 7 in which he showed his own earnest desire to please God and live up to his law, but utter failure to do so, which he also generalises in order to show us that no one can do so. Believing the promise is the only way.

Vs 17-18

This section discusses the example of Pharaoh. A recap of the Old Testament story may help.

Moses was given a promise about saving his people from slavery and (somewhat reluctantly) he believed it. He went to Pharaoh and warned him – he preached to him to let the people of God go, and demonstrated his authority from God through powerful miracles. But Pharaoh hardened his heart by rejecting Moses, and then proceeded to antagonise and oppress God's people more and more, as his heart hardened more and more. Then Moses, leader of the physical people of God, after the Passover event, leads God's people out of Egypt gloriously, but Pharaoh, and his nation Egypt, (which symbolises this world) – is judged and punished through these events.

So this story fits the same pattern as has already been established in terms of certain people believing or rejecting the promise, but interestingly in this case, it is a story in which the “hardened one” was not from the physical line of Abraham. By taking a pattern established with the likes of Isaac and Ishmael, and then applying it to a Gentile ruler, Paul is thereby generalising the principle of “faith verses flesh” to apply to all people. The point is now even more clearly *not* about physical descent from Abraham, but about one's response to God's authoritative promise.

So how is the pattern the same? Pharaoh, by rejecting Christ's representative – Moses, and God's promise, joins the lineage of Ishmael, Esau and the like – of people who don't believe God's promise. “But he was a Gentile ruler!” you might say. How could we expect him to simply let the people of God go?

Actually many Gentile leaders of similar stature heard similar preaching or saw similar miracles through God's representatives and then believed. They worshipped God, proclaiming God to be the one true God to the entire nation. Nebuchadnezzar does in the days of Daniel, Xerxes does in the days of Esther,

the King of Nineveh does too, in the days of Jonah, among many other examples. Perhaps the clearest contrast to Pharaoh is King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian empire, who lets God's exiled people go back to their homeland and even pays their expenses, and gives them royal protection along the way. But not Pharaoh. His faithlessness hardens him, a principle that God sovereignly put in place, and his faithless rejection of Moses – here a symbol of Christ, brings down upon him an inevitable destruction and condemnation at the appointed time.

God also sovereignly chooses to *use* the hardening and ultimate destruction of the faithless ones such as Pharaoh, to demonstrate his power and ability to save the faithful of Israel, here symbolised by the people following Moses out of Egypt. Because God set up these principles of faith and unbelief, and continually enforces them throughout history, he *can* be said to actively harden Pharaoh's heart, as an unbeliever, for his own purposes. But this by no means negates the fact that Pharaoh hardens his own heart through unbelief, which is made clear in the Old Testament account.⁶

So how does all this relate to the context we have established regarding the situation of the Jews in Paul's day? Pharaoh is a direct parallel to the unbelieving Jews of Paul's day because like them, Pharaoh saw the indisputable authority of Moses through the miracles that were performed, and yet failed to trust God's promise, just as the Jews saw the indisputable miracles of Christ, and failed to believe.

The point about God showing mercy upon whom he wants to show mercy therefore refers to his decision to show mercy to those who believe his promise, rather than showing mercy to those who rely on the flesh, which is the general worldly assumption regarding what God *should* do. In Pharaoh's case, on the surface at least, reliance on the flesh was about relying on his power, his pompous pride in his own ability, and in his many chariots.

But what he was trying to prove to himself or others by this display is another question. It seems likely, from what we know of humanity, that underneath he was trying to impress his God, or his Father, his wife, his peers, his people – someone or other. And therefore he was probably trying to measure up to some standard of expectation or other, and was feeling somewhat insecure about how he was tracking. The most insecure kings always tend to be the scariest and the most oppressive, and Pharaoh *was* pretty oppressive.

In the Jew's of Paul's day's case, reliance on the flesh also led to being oppressive. But then reliance on the flesh also translated to trying really hard to measure up to God's law. So God's rejection of them probably seems a little more confronting than God rejecting Pharaoh, because they seem like they are at least trying to please the one true God, unlike Pharaoh. But in reality, they are both in the same boat – both trying to set up their own way of salvation through measuring up, and both are equally condemned.

If we doubt that this is the meaning here, we should remember that Paul brings up Pharaoh's example in a succession of arguments that specifically address the current situation of the unbelieving Jews. These Jews - as he has shown regarding his own case in ch 7, and as he will shortly demonstrate in Ch 10, *do* try very hard.

It probably would have seemed intensely insulting to a Jew, who was trying hard to please God through obeying the law - to be compared with Pharaoh like this, but I believe this *was* Paul's point. What they both had in common was unbelief, through self-reliance.

⁶ Pharaoh hardened his own heart in Exodus 8:15,32; 9:34. But the text also says that God hardened his heart in 9:12,10:20,27, 11:10. So an understanding which truly explains both sets of verses is required. Saying it is a mystery is not really an explanation in my view, as any doctrinal view, however erroneous, can be justified like that.

As mentioned, this idea of God rejecting those who try to measure up to law and standards, and acceptance of those who believe his promise, can still feel quite foreign to us at times, even 2000 years later, even with the whole Bible to read and study.

This observation serves well to demonstrate that it may have felt much *more* foreign to those in Paul's day, prior to the completion of the New Testament.

Vs 19

Here Paul answers an inevitable objection to his argument, which is: "Then why does God still blame us, for who resists his will?"

The key questions here, to help understand this verse are firstly: "blame us *for what?*" and secondly: "resists his will *about what?*"

I think this first question refers to "why does God still blame us for our failure to measure up to law, even when we try hard – since, as has been said in chapters 1-3, he has made it *impossible* to measure up to law."⁷

In other words, the hypothetical debater that Paul is jousting with points out that God has firstly made a situation in which no one is perfect according to his law, because of free will, internal weakness and powerful external influences. And yet secondly, one in which God then blames people for not being perfect. Is that fair, he asks? It seems a reasonable question on one level.

The second question flows from the first – therefore his will is about the way he has set things up, that sin is so powerful that all of us are engulfed by it, albeit through our own choice to sin, such that we all need his mercy in Christ.⁸

We must all, therefore, believe in his promise, as the only means of receiving mercy. Measuring up to law is ignoring the reality of God's will - in setting things up such that we simply can't do so.

Vs 20-24

At this point Paul tells it straight – God has the right to do what he wants in the way he sets things up. If he sets things up such that those who believe his promise (the pots made for noble purposes) find mercy, he can do that. And if he sets up a situation in which those who try to measure up to law (the pots made for common use) receive condemnation, and are hardened by their own failure to measure up, he has the right to do this too.

But Paul's argument, while confronting, also escapes the accusation of creating a sense of unfairness about God's way, because people still *do* have a choice – to believe his promise, or to try to measure up to law. God has not left people without any option, without any way out of their problem of sin and imperfection. So we can't say it is unfair. And yet his argument still reasonably asserts that we are wiser if we simply respond to the (fair) order of things that God has established, rather than question his wisdom for setting things up this way, when he has every right to do so.

7 If the point had been (from a Calvinist perspective) about why God blames all unbelieving people for not believing, when it was God's own sovereign will to work faith only in the hearts of some, then the question posed would still stand unanswered. "Why does God blame us (unbelievers) when he deliberately refrained from working faith in our hearts? How are we supposed to believe if God made sure that we can't by ourselves, and if he also refuses to enable us to believe?" Blaming such people truly would seem unfair, and I believe it also would be unfair.

8 See Romans 11:32, which states God's will in this as clearly as it could possibly be stated. Also note here that he wanted to have mercy on everyone, that he loves everyone, not just a few.

Vs 25-29

Here Paul shows from the Old Testament that it was always God's plan to do things this way. The undeserving are slated to be shown mercy by simply believing the promise, *even including the Gentiles*. But from Israel, only a remnant will be saved from judgment – again, those who believe the promise, just as only a remnant were saved from God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.

Vs 30-32a

Here Paul summarises the outcome of God's plan. The Gentiles (obviously - who have become Christians) did not pursue righteousness (ie they did not try to measure up to law), and yet they received righteousness – the righteousness that comes through faith in God's promise. But Israel (the nation - obviously *apart* from the tiny remnant that believed the promise as Paul did), who pursued a law of righteousness, failed to attain it, because they pursued it according to works (i.e., of the law), instead of according to faith in God's promise.

Vs 32b-33

Here, another way of making this same point refers back to prophetic Scriptures about Jesus being the stone that God lays in Zion that makes men stumble, but which also saves those who place trust in it.

“Stumbling over the stumbling stone” is about trying to attain righteousness according to law, because Jesus came to forgive those who realise that they *can't* measure up to law, and who therefore turn to him in faith instead. Those who think they can attain righteousness through law, reject Jesus as being unnecessary, and miss the meaning of the prophecies about a “suffering servant” who comes to save sinners etc. They look for a totally different kind of Messiah, one who rewards their zeal and effort, (and their related social standing), according to their works of righteousness. This attitude brought on the competitiveness, hypocrisy, unruliness and violence that was so evident among the Jews of Paul's day.

Chapter 10: 1-4

Here Paul openly acknowledges that the Israelites did not fail to receive righteousness for lack of zeal. They were certainly zealous - and zealous *for God* too. They really did *want* to please God, and really did *try* to please him. Paul can testify to this himself, having been a prime example of this very zeal, and having moved in the circles of the Pharisees himself.

There can be an approach to the Pharisees and religious Jews of Jesus's day that is unfair. Such a view sees them as a bunch of crooks who didn't care about serving God one Iota, and who were hypocritical, sinful and oppressive *by deliberate primary choice* rather than by the *secondary consequence* of a deeper choice. People who see them in this way miss the point entirely, and Paul refutes this idea emphatically. He generalises about them by saying they were genuine, just as he himself was genuine - in desiring to please God, and in earnestly trying to do his will.

Their issue is not a lack of zeal, their issue is one of understanding - the lack of *knowledge* that their zeal was based on - a lack which in turn was related to their pride. They did not know the righteousness that comes from God (the righteousness that comes through believing the promise of forgiveness through Christ), and sought to establish their own righteousness (by measuring up to law). This was the deeper primary choice I was referring to – they chose the wrong option here.

Christ is the end of the law – he is the one who fulfilled it, and did what none of us could do, and he therefore *finished* it. Its purpose was always only to point to him, and to wait for him to fulfil it. Every human failure that is recorded in contrast to law begged the ultimate question of who would ever live up to it. Now that this fulfilment had occurred in Christ, the law's primary function was ended. Now it fulfils a different role in one sense, and the same role in another. It is different in that it is not something we are under now, but it is the same in that it is a constant reminder that we can't measure up to law by

ourselves, even today. It is also a rich source of information about Christ and his kingdom, a wealth of pointers to who he is and what he has achieved, prophetically proving him to be the Saviour in literally countless ways.

Conclusion

We have seen that there is *no need*, in Romans chapter 9:1-10:4, to resort to the idea that “God sovereignly works faith in the heart,” without this work being subject to our will and decision. Nor is there any need, or basis for the idea that God deliberately and sovereignly hardens certain individuals, where “sovereign” is taken to mean that this is done irrespective of human factors.

We have seen that this interpretation entirely misses the point of the passage, which is that physical Israel is currently being hardened through their own primary choice of unbelief – thus explaining the inevitable secondary effects of this approach - why they are behaving in such a hardened, unruly and self-destructive manner.

We also saw that, through their unbelief, these people are not actually Israel anyway – they are symbolically linked to Ishmael and Esau – to the physical descendants of Abraham who never shared in his inheritance – who never were part of Israel. We see that they are also likened to Pharaoh, who rejected Moses despite overwhelming and miraculous proof - as they had also rejected Jesus, despite overwhelming and miraculous proof.

We see through this, that God hardens people through their choice of unbelief, and he softens people through their choice of faith in his gracious promise. God transforms us through our decision to turn to him for help, in turn because God is a God who loves us and wants to help us, even when we don't deserve such help.

Indeed, God has created a situation in which we do need his help. We cannot realistically live up to law, and God deliberately made it to be this way. But it is also entirely God's right to set things up like this. He did so because he wanted to show us his love – he wanted to sacrifice himself to save us. Without this dire situation, we wouldn't ever have ever known the extent of God's love for us.

So instead of describing an alien “sovereign working of faith or hardening in the individual heart” idea which occurs nowhere else in the letter, we saw that the message of this section is linked directly to the whole theme of Romans – a message about “believing the promise.”

This point is further proved by the fact that the last few verses in this section, Chapter 10:1-4, state this theme in the most compellingly clear way, providing a neat summary for the whole argument so far in the book of Romans. In this section, the Jews' wilful lack of submission to God's way of faith, and choice to pursue the way of law and flesh, is clearly the issue in their downfall.

This Chapter 10:1-4 wrap up of the argument so far, is not about God preventing them from finding him, but about them boring down into the darkness, defiantly pursuing a way that leads to oblivion.

So perhaps the time has come for us to submit to the paradigm that this section of Scripture actually offers us, rather than continuing to try to force it into different, and rather objectionable hole.

The Calvinistic picture is one that, I believe, has painted God in a very unflattering light, as a God who hardens a person's heart, and then punishes him for being hardened, and then tells anyone who dares to question such “justice” to simply shut up.

That is not a picture of God that inspires faith or worship, nor is it one that gives any comfort or assurance about one's own future. It is a capricious and harsh view of God that leads to a cowering and insecure "faith," a faith that doesn't ask questions, that doesn't dig deep and that worships God as wonderful because it must, rather than because God is simply and *evidently* wonderful.

Is this *really* what faith is about? A sense of cowering insecurity, and forced worship?

I'm not saying that all evangelicals have such a view of God by the way – in fact my impression is that many, even most do not like to see God in this way at all. But perhaps this is why they tend to handle this section of Scripture with a sense of trepidation, and only from a safe distance, with long, radioactive-proof tongs. Perhaps this is also why they only bring it into play when *absolutely necessary* - to make a theological point that they are familiar with, but which they are frankly not all that *comfortable* with, when they really follow it through.

Like making a mad midnight raid into enemy territory, evangelicals dash into this section to make the point they want, and get out of it quick smart before their own logic catches them. What I mean is that many evangelicals like to take the parts of this passage that seem to support the idea of God working faith in our hearts all by himself, but they also typically prefer to reject the parts that seem to talk of God deliberately hardening people's hearts. Many even have an unflattering name for those who believe such unseemly things – "*Hyper Calvinist*."

They react like this because "God unilaterally hardening a person's heart" is an objectionable idea to anyone who believes in a genuinely loving God who died for all his children, and who truly wants them all to be saved. Quite rightly, they desperately want to see God as being *genuinely* loving, because the whole notion of trusting God hangs on this premise. Who could trust an unloving God with their entire life? Any Scripture interpretation even *hinting* that God is not genuinely loving is therefore toxic to their faith. Therefore it must be rationalised and cordoned-off and generally avoided.

But unfortunately, sometimes – just as chemotherapy is sometimes necessary to heal cancer- such toxic interpretations are also found to be necessary for correcting a key (supposed) false doctrine - the notion that "man can choose to believe or not." It's a difficult situation.

To achieve a satisfactory outcome, after using this section to make the case that God is totally sovereign over *all* things – even over our faith, they typically slip a little bit of human sovereignty in the back door without *even them* noticing – the sovereignty to harden *our own* heart.

So God chooses to irresistibly put the spark of faith into our hearts as Christians, but he has *no part* in the damning absence of that spark in unbelievers, who sovereignly choose *their own* damnation, and sovereignly choose unbelief. But could they themselves have chosen to believe God's promise of grace, and so be saved? Never! Heresy! This would not be possible without God supplying the faith, such that the *whole* enterprise of human faith is *entirely* God's.

So the damned had only one real option to choose from – unbelief. And yet they apparently still *had* a choice, and they are still *responsible* for that choice? Excuse me for asking – but what does the word "choice" actually *mean* in the dictionary? Doesn't it *always* mean to decide between possibilities, between *more than one* real option?

But Calvinism brings to the world of logic the concept of the "one option choice," and to anyone who questions their logic, they bring the concept of "the mystery."

And then when the heat really comes on, they openly defy *their own* Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 9:18!

Obviously, if evangelicals hang around too long in Romans 9, such “mysteries” threaten to catch them with their wares. So it is no great wonder that they like to avoid close scrutiny of this passage, and that they usually end a Romans series at chapter 8. If they do study this passage, they typically do so starting at chapter 9, but without much reference to the theme of “believing the promise” found in Romans chapters 1-8, leaving their much loved-principles of exposition crying at the altar.

But how good would it be to be able to bring this section in close, and to welcome it as a friend, through seeing that its message is not the capricious one that has been suggested? How great would it be to see that it is a powerful and inspiring argument about believing the promise of God, and therefore it addresses a theme closely tied in with the whole message of Romans?

Hopefully the reader will be willing to continue to search this section, and to send their mind on a quest to find the truth about it, rather than simply being satisfied with the Calvinistic status quo.