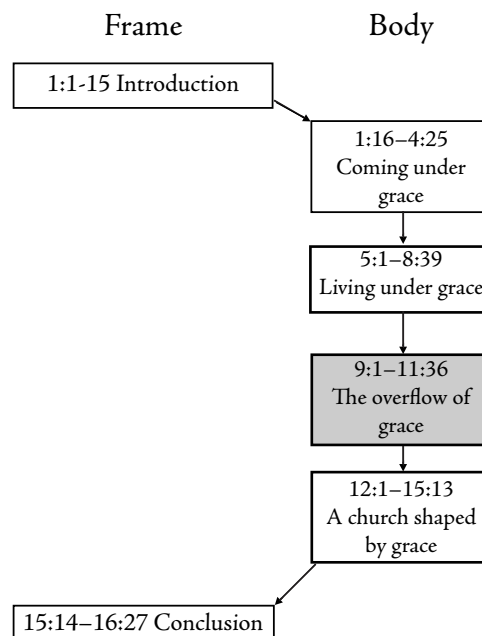




4

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 9–11



I have called this section ‘The overflow of grace’. It is often just called something like ‘Jews and Gentiles’, but I hope we shall see that it is fundamentally about overflowing grace. I hope we shall also see, perhaps to our surprise, that these chapters are essentially simple, clear, practical and relevant.



Many Bible teachers avoid Romans 9–11. We teach chapters 1-8, but then we tend to skip to chapter 12. There are at least three reasons for this:

1. We worry that it doesn't seem very relevant. It may be that there are few Jewish Christians in our church, and few Jewish unbelievers with whom we have much contact. Added to that we suspect that these chapters relate only to the particular historical situation with Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day, and/or to some end-time ingathering of the Jews. Either way, a section that focuses on the conversion or unbelief of Jewish people doesn't seem to scratch where many of us itch.
2. We are anxious about getting entangled in controversies about Christian Zionism and related questions about the future of the state of Israel and/or the Jewish people, and what Paul means when he says, 'all Israel will be saved' (11:26).
3. Chapters 9–11 contain a unique concentration of Old Testament quotations. On average every third verse is a quote. Of all the Old Testament quotes in all Paul's letters, one third are squeezed into these three chapters. This makes it harder for us to take the easy path of skipping over the quotes, and daunting to think we need to look at each quote in its Old Testament context.

The third of these is easily answered: we must not be lazy! But it is worth saying a word about the other two.

1. Are Romans 9–11 relevant?

On the question of relevance, it is worth asking what lines of application may be drawn from the Jew of Romans. The primary line must be to the Jewish people, since it is

the Jewish people who were the original recipients of the privileges Paul describes in 3:2 and 9:4, 5. They are the ones whose ancestor ‘according to the flesh’ (ethnically) was Abraham (4:1).

However, we ought also to notice the very strong similarities between the Jew of Romans and the religious unbeliever in the Christian church today. In some ways these similarities are stronger than those between the Jew of Romans and a secular and liberal Jewish person today. Paul gives an outline sketch of the ‘Jew’ of Romans in 2:17–20; 3:2; and 9:4, 5, from which we may notice the following characteristics, each of which is more closely paralleled by the nominal Christian today, than by the secular Jew.

1. The ‘Jew’ is pleased to think that he or she has a relationship with God (2:17). The nominal Christian fits this category as well as the religious Jew today.
2. The ‘Jew’ knows God’s moral standards (2:18a, 20) because they have been entrusted with the very words of God (3:2). In our terms, they have a Bible and have received some instruction in it.
3. The ‘Jew’ approves God’s moral standards (2:18b) and is pleased to tell others what is right and what is wrong (2:19, 20). They are not at all like the wicked people of 1:32 who approve of wrongdoing.
4. The ‘Jew’ has a religious history and has enjoyed tremendous religious privileges (9:4, 5). While the main meaning must be the ethnic Jew, there are remarkable similarities with the person who, perhaps, has a Christian parent, has belonged to a church for a time, has been baptized. Maybe they go to a well-known church or have rubbed shoulders with well-known Christians.

They 'wear the T-shirt'; they have been there and done the Christian thing.

So although the original and primary meaning of these chapters relates to God's purposes for the Jewish people, these defining marks of the 'Jew' of Romans also fit very well with the religious unbeliever in church today, the professing Christian who has departed from grace in some way, or indeed has always been a stranger to grace. There are many like this in our churches. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, they are close relatives of the elder brother of Luke 15. Some of them are in pulpits. There is a real danger that one of them may be writing this book. These chapters are not of esoteric interest or marginal concern; they are of very great relevance to every church and each Christian.

2. *Must Romans 9–11 be controversial?*

Paul's reaction to the truths he expounds is not to conclude by saying, 'Well, that was a tricky and not very uplifting section; let's get on quickly to chapter 12'; or 'Wasn't that fascinating, all that stuff about the Jews?' No, he closes with an outburst of heartfelt praise at the wonderful wisdom and grace of God (11:33-36). Presumably if we understand these chapters aright, so will we.

This is a litmus test of whether we are reading these chapters aright. If they do not leave us amazed at the wisdom and glory of God, we have misunderstood them. So Romans 9–11 need not be, and ought not to be, controversial. There are puzzles, but we must not allow them to dominate.

How do Romans 9–11 fit into the letter?

We need to consider the historical context in Rome, the literary context before this section, the character of this

section itself, and the literary context after the section. I will comment briefly on each.

The historical context in Rome

Most of the substantial Jewish community in Rome did not become believers in Jesus the Messiah. But we have seen (ch. 1) that the church in Rome did contain both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and that Paul's concern for harmony between these is a major theme of the letter (ch. 2). One of the interesting shifts in chapters 9–11 is that Paul explicitly addresses the Gentile Christians (11:13) for the first time, and tells them not to be arrogant (11:18, 20, 25), just as he has told the Jewish Christians not to boast (3:27).

What comes before chapters 9–11?

One of the questions that has exercised Paul in chapters 1–8 is whether God is faithful to his covenant promises. He defends this briefly in 3:3, 4, and returns to it in 4:13–25, where he insists that the promise is 'guaranteed' because it comes entirely by grace (4:16). In some ways, chapters 5–8 can be seen as a sustained proof that the grace of God in Christ guarantees that God will save everyone he has foreknown and predestined (8:28–30). The unbelief of most of Paul's fellow-Jews seems to challenge this assertion. So the big question behind chapters 9–11 is the faithfulness of God to his promises to Abraham.

The character of chapters 9–11

We have already noted the extraordinary density of Old Testament quotations. This follows naturally from Paul's concern to prove that God does what he has promised (i.e. does what the Old Testament says he will do).

Another characteristic of these chapters is that Jesus Christ is referred to simply as 'Christ' (Messiah, a title rather than a name), because Paul's main focus is Jesus' role as the promised Anointed One ('Messiah' in Hebrew, 'Christ' in Greek). The Messiah is central to the chapters. We see this especially in the crucial verses 9:5 (where he is probably called 'God over all'), 10:4 ('Christ is the end of the law'), and 10:17 ('faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ').

What comes after chapters 9–11?

Chapter 12 begins, "Therefore, brothers, I urge you, in view of God's mercy..." There are two synonymous word groups translated 'mercy/compassion' or 'show mercy/show compassion.' These words do not occur in chapters 1–8 but occur a total of eleven times in chapters 9–11 (9:15 – 4 times; 9:16, 18, 23; 11:30, 31 – twice; 11:32). This strongly suggests that the appeal of chapter 12 builds closely on the exposition of God's grace and mercy in chapters 9–11.

The structure of Romans 9-11

At 9:1, with no connecting word, Paul abruptly changes tone from the triumphant assurance of the end of chapter 8 to one of deep grief. This signals the start of a new major section of the letter, which is introduced in 9:1-5. This major section concludes with the magnificent paean of praise in 11:33-36.

In between this introduction and conclusion we may conveniently divide the section into four main parts. First, in 9:6-29, he defends the proposition that the word of God has not failed (9:6). He does this by focusing on the sovereign initiative of God in grace. Next, in 9:30–10:21, he moves (by a rhetorical question in 9:30) to consider what

this sovereign grace means in terms of human response to grace. Then, in 11:1-10, he returns to the question of whether God has rejected his people. Finally, in 11:11-32, he ends with a section aimed at keeping Gentile Christians humble. Often Paul ends a section with a compilation of Old Testament quotations (notably 9:25-29; 10:18-21; 11:8-10).

<i>Introduction</i>	9:1-5	<i>The tragedy of the religious unbeliever</i>
Section A	9:6-29	The sovereign mercy of God
Section B	9:30– 10:21	Human responses to the word of Christ
Section C	11:1-10	The remnant chosen by grace
Section D	11:11-32	The overflow of grace
<i>Conclusion</i>	11:33-36	<i>The glory of the overflowing grace of God</i>

One of the keys to this section is to ask how Paul moves from the intense sorrow of 9:1-5 to the joyful adoration of 11:33-36.