

## "GOD'S CONTINUING FAITHFULNESS TO UNBELIEVING ISRAEL"

(Romans 9:1-5)

(Frank Theilman)

The passage could hardly be clearer that Paul continued to identify himself with unbelieving Israelites, whom he calls his brothers and sisters in 9:3 (τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου). It is also clear that Paul's grief ran deep that so few Israelites had believed the gospel. In 9:1-5 he is already laying the groundwork for his conclusion in 11:25-29 that all Israel will be saved and that the gifts and the calling of God to his people Israel are irrevocable. The Jews and gentiles who believe the gospel have received the gifts and privileges Paul lists in 9:4-5 in their ultimate, eschatological form. Nevertheless, these gifts and privileges continue to belong in their unfulfilled condition to the Jews. They are the spiritual blessings that gentile believers have come to share and for which they are indebted to the Jews (15:27; cf. 11:18). Thus, although Paul goes on to argue that physical descent from Abraham does not make one a child of God in the ultimate sense (9:7-13), he does not mean by this that Jews have lost their identity as God's people in light of the gospel (cf. 3:1-2).

None of this implies that Christians do not need to proclaim the gospel to unbelieving Jews. Paul's anguish over the unbelief of the majority of his Jewish kinfolk is the dominant message of the passage and arises from his compassionate concern that so many of them are not benefitting from the gospel. The gospel is the wonderful news that God has broken the grip of sin and death on humanity through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It is hardly a kindness to anyone, least of all the Jewish people, to withhold this message from them.

The long, horrific history of "Christian" oppression of the Jews certainly introduces an element of complexity into the way in which Christians should communicate the gospel to Jewish people. A thorough knowledge of this history and a Spirit-transformed character of humility, kindness, empathy, and compassion are therefore essential accompaniments to any Christian effort in this direction. But unless one has lost faith in the gospel to transform human life in positive ways, the most compassionate response to the sad story of Jewish oppression is not to keep the message of the gospel from anyone simply because he or she is Jewish.

