

## UNDERSTANDING PAUL

### A Devotional Meditation on Bechukotai (In My Statutes)

Leviticus 26:3-27:34; Jeremiah 16:19-17:14;  
John 10:22-29; Acts 15:12-21; Romans 11:25-29; 2 Peter 3:14-18

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Can we be honest and confess that we have a hard time understanding Paul? If Peter wrote about the difficulty of understanding his apostolic colleague, why should we pretend that we know exactly what Paul meant in his letters? Peter and Paul spoke the same language and lived in the same Jewish-Greco-Roman culture, yet Peter cautioned his readers that Paul was sometimes hard to understand. Why should we be surprised when, after 2,000 years, we have trouble understanding Paul when we read his letters in translation and have little understanding of his culture?



Saint Paul, *El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos) and workshop, Toledo, Spain, 1608-1614* ([Museo del Prado, Madrid](https://www.museodelprado.es/en/colecciones-y-exhibiciones/exhibiciones-actuales/saint-paul)).

Here's an example: I went to a Presbyterian high school where we encountered the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, but I grew up in a Baptist church, where the prevailing view was the Arminian doctrine of free will. Simply put, Calvinism emphasizes the sovereignty of God in knowing from the beginning who will be saved, while Arminianism emphasizes the responsibility of each individual to accept or reject God's free gift of salvation. Both doctrines draw from Paul to make their case. That's why one of my fellow students asked our Bible teacher which was correct. He answered that since both are in the Bible, both must be correct. He didn't elaborate on how that could be, leaving us all perplexed.

It would have been less perplexing if our Bible instruction had emphasized that Paul was a Jewish scholar who died more than a thousand years before John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius were born. Their theological constructs took shape in the revolutionary world of the Reformation, as Protestants sought to correct the errors and excesses of the Church of Rome. By that time, the Hebraic origins of Christianity had receded far into the mists of time. Thus, instead of questioning whether Paul's context might have had a Torah connection, the Reformers applied Paul's writings to their concepts of salvation and righteous living.

At the distance of half a millennium, we see the blind spots our spiritual fathers and mothers of the Reformation couldn't see. That's the fruit of the Torah Awakening God has poured out on the church in our days. We notice things like Paul's quotes from Moses and the Prophets as he builds his arguments.

With that in mind, let's look at a text that puzzled me until realized I how it resonated with the Old Testament:

For I do not want you, brothers and sisters, to be ignorant of this mystery—lest you be wise in your own eyes—that a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the

fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

“The Deliverer shall come out of Zion.  
He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.  
And this is My covenant with them,  
when I take away their sins.”

Concerning the Good News, they are hostile for your sake; but concerning chosenness, they are loved on account of the fathers—for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Romans 11:25-29 TLV

Paul quotes from Isaiah 59 and Jeremiah 31, two passages that explain the New Covenant God makes with Israel by giving them new hearts and pouring out His Spirit on them so they may live according to His righteous standards. That’s the New Covenant initiated by Messiah Yeshua, and into which all of us from the nations are adopted. That’s why, as Paul explains, we from the nations are grafted into the olive tree of Israel.

This should be a reason for us to establish relationships with Jewish people who know the Torah so we can learn from them, which is what the Apostles intended. However, our ignorance of the Hebraic context of the New Testament, as well as the circumstances of history, have caused the Gentile church to regard Jews as cursed of God because of their role in the execution of Messiah Yeshua.

It is true that God poured out His wrath on all Israel. The northern tribes were absorbed into the nations and lost their identity, which is why they are called the “Lost Tribes.” The Jewish tribes retained their identity, but suffered every judgment God pronounced for Israel’s disregard of His Covenant. A survey of Jewish history quickly reveals that the judgments God spoke in Leviticus 26 have been meted out. The Jewish people have been chased out of one country after another, have served foreign masters, and have suffered poverty, fear, weakness, and hopelessness. It is a wonder that they have survived as a people, and even more of a wonder that they have returned to their ancestral homeland just as God promised.

As Jews have wandered through the centuries, a remnant has always remained faithful to God, and has turned to Him in repentance, knowing that their sufferings are the result of God’s righteous judgment. In this they have taken hope, knowing that restoration will come in time:

But if they confess their iniquity and that of their fathers, in the treachery they committed against Me, and how they walked contrary to Me—in return I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies—and if at that time their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled, so that they accept the punishment for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob and also My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. But the land will be deserted by them and will enjoy its *Shabbatot* [Sabbaths] while it lies desolate without them, and they will accept the punishment of their iniquity, because they rejected My ordinances and their soul abhorred My statutes.

Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I hate them into utter destruction, and break My covenant with them, for I am *ADONAI* their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am *ADONAI*.

Leviticus 26:40-45 TLV

This is the source of Paul's confident assertions that, "all Israel will be saved," and that, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." That salvation and those gifts are the fruit of the unbreakable Covenant He made with the Patriarchs, the Land, and the People of Israel. That's why all of us from the nations are brought into that Covenant, so that Israel's Messiah can say of His sheep that no one can snatch them out of His hand or His Father's hand.

This is the Covenant that unites Christians and Jews. It's still a mystery exactly how it works, but the God of the universe guarantees that it does work. Paul knew that and tried to explain it. Maybe if we start afresh, we can come closer to understanding him and his message. In the meantime, let us honor our elder brothers and sisters in the Covenant, and pray for full revelation to be poured out on us all as we walk out this mystery together.