

One People
Romans 11
February 11, 2018

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ³ “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” ⁴ But what is God's reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

⁷ What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸ as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.” ⁹ And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; ¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.”

¹¹ So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. In as much then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. ²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; ²⁷ “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

²⁸ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy

because of their disobedience,³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11:1-36 (ESV)

This morning we are concluding this section of Paul’s letter to the early Christians in Rome, chapters 9 – 11, which addresses the continued role of the Israelites in God’s plan of salvation. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, biblical scholars and theologians have studied this carefully for hundreds of years and have been unable to come up with one definitive answer. So to think that we are going to be able to is rather absurd. But that doesn’t mean that we are to just skip over certain parts of God’s word because we find them difficult or we can’t come to clear discernment on a specific issue. Paul tells us in his 2nd letter to Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man [or woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Last week Alex left off in Romans 10 and pointed out that salvation is something that cannot be earned, neither for Jew or Gentile. It is a free gift from God through His Son Jesus Christ, his death on the cross and his resurrection, and comes through faith in Him, the key verses being Romans 10:9:

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

So where does that leave the Jewish people, the Israelites today? It leaves them in the same place today as when Paul wrote this letter almost 2,000 years ago. The very beginning of chapter 11, *I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of David, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.* Skipping to v. 5, *So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.⁶ But if it is by faith, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*

⁷ *What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.* The elect were and are those who choose to believe in God by faith. In O.T. times they were the ones who believed in God by faith, referred to as “the remnant.” Many of the others did not come to God by faith and they were hardened. Through the Israelites stumble, God has brought the Gentiles in.

Paul uses the analogy or the symbolism of an olive tree. The olive tree was one of the most common trees in the land around Jerusalem. The olive tree represents the nation Israel, the original people of God. But some were broken off, those broken off representing all the Israelites who chose not to put their faith in God. *They were broken off because of their unbelief.* But because of that God allowed others to be grafted in. The others, referred to as “a wild olive shoot,” represents the Gentiles, those Gentiles who come to God by faith in Jesus Christ.

But then Paul warns the Gentiles, beginning in the 2nd half of v. 20, ²⁰ *That is true. They [they meaning those Israelites who did not come to God by faith], were broken off because of their unbelief, but you [meaning the Gentiles] stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.* ²¹ *For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.* ²² *Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.*

The kindness and the severity of God. I almost titled my message this morning, “The kindness and the severity of God.” Let’s be honest, we all like God’s kindness but we struggle with His severity. We like to talk about God’s kindness of salvation to eternity through Jesus Christ for all who believe, but we struggle with God’s severity of eternal life apart from Him for all who do not believe, described by Jesus himself in not so nice of terms.

But God has not given up on the Israelites, even to this day. Just as he has not given up on Gentiles who have yet to put their faith in Jesus Christ. Again, 2 Peter 3:9, which I quoted from a couple of weeks ago, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” That represents God’s kindness. But 2 Peter 3:9 is followed by 2 Peter 3:10, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” That represents God’s severity.

Paul continues on in v. 23, *And even they [now he’s back talking about the Israelites], if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.* Or perhaps more accurately, “back in.”

Then we get to verse 26, and we get the verse that has caused much struggle and differences for biblical scholars and theologians throughout the years: “And all Israel will be saved.” This does not mean that every single Jew will be saved. The phrase “all Israel” occurs more than 100 times in the Old Testament with a range of meaning, but most of the time it refers to some number of Israelites as a representative whole. It would be like saying today that because there are many Christians in the United States that all of America is going to be saved, which is not the case.

Most biblical commentators believe, and I say most, again recognizing that there are others who believe otherwise, most believe that at the end of time, the end of this time as it currently exists, whenever that may be, the time in which God has determined, when the number of Gentiles (non-Jews) have come into the fold, at the time of Jesus’ 2nd coming, Paul is prophesying that a significant number of Jews will be saved, will come to faith in Jesus Christ, much larger than the current “remnant of Israel” that has existed at any other time.

Israel, the Jewish people, have had and still have a special place in God’s heart. Some believe that Paul was teaching two ways to salvation – 1) Gentiles through the New Covenant, through faith in Jesus Christ, and 2) a second way for Jews, the Old Covenant, or the Torah Covenant, through the law which God established with Israel. But we find in the Old Testament story that no one was able to perfectly keep that covenant. And it also contradicts Paul’s statement in Romans 10:13, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Paul is prophesying

that on the last day (or at the last time) there will be a significant turning to Christ for salvation among many of the Jewish people.

Exactly how that will happen and how many from Israel will be saved is something we are not going to be able to answer. Only God knows. But I think we need to be careful that we don't go too much toward one side or the other.

Paul's overriding concern in Romans 9-11 is to stifle undue pride for both Jews and Gentiles. Our natural human tendency is to prefer people like us, people who think and act like us, and we end up thinking of ourselves superior to people who are different than us, and we quickly develop a "we're in, they're out" theology.

"Anti-Semitism", anti-Jewish people, has been a powerful and violent force in our world throughout the centuries, both before and after Jesus was born and died on the cross. We need to look no further than Adolph Hitler. "Anti-Semitism" has been a powerful force in the church, like when many Christians looked the other way during Hitler's regime. "Anti-Semitism" has been a powerful force in the United States over the years, but so is "Christian Zionism" – that which says we need to support and defend Jewish people and the nation of Israel at all costs. In fact I would argue that taken to the extreme, "Christian Zionism" is an oxymoron.

Paul is not advocating here for any kind of specific geographic or political future for Israel here on earth. What he is advocating for is "One People" in God which started with the Israelites, through the calling of Abraham, of a people who would come to him by faith, and extending that invitation to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people) who are brought in by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul has spent the first eleven chapters of his letter describing the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, to both Jew and Gentile. The heart of that gospel is Christ, and especially his death on the cross for all human beings. No one can be saved today apart from the Good News, the Gospel, apart from faith in Christ.

Illustration:

There's a story about a young woman who was married and had two beautiful children, but one day as she was standing over the sink, washing dishes, she thought, "There must be more to life than this." When her husband came home, he found a note she'd written and he began to weep. She said she would call him once every week to check on the children, but that she could no longer do it. Every time she called he would always tell her of his great love for her and beg her to come home. She would always say no and hang up. This went on for a couple of years.

Finally, he hired a private investigator to find her and he went to the apartment where she was staying, nervously holding a flowers in his hand as he stood at the door. He had rehearsed over and over what he would say and he finally got up the nerve to knock on the door. She opened the door and he started to speak, but she suddenly began to weep and fell into his arms. Through her tears she said, "Let's go home."

Months after, when things were starting to heal, he finally asked her something that had been bothering him: "All those times I talked to you on the phone; I asked you to come back and you

refused. Why did you come back now?” “Before,” she said, “you were just telling me that you loved me. **When you came, you showed me.**” The Bible tells us of God’s love, but Jesus came and showed God’s love, both for the Jewish people and for the Gentiles, for all people, that we may be one people through faith in Jesus Christ.

We get towards the end of chapter 11 and in a period of three verses (v. 30-32) we find the word “mercy” four times. First, Paul talks about mercy being extended to the Gentiles. Then there is God’s mercy extended to the Jews. For just as the Gentiles were once disobedient God extended them mercy, and to the Jewish people who became disobedient God has extended them mercy. And in fact all people have been disobedient so that God may extend mercy to all!

God has taken it upon himself and overruled the disobedience of all men and women, Jew and Gentile alike, so that He might offer to all, His mercy. We often talk about Grace, but seldom do we talk about mercy. Why is that? Yet, the word mercy is found in the Bible almost the exact same amount of times as grace (131-129). In many ways the two words are very similar, but I think mercy expresses our deeper need for God’s intervention in our lives when it comes to salvation.

Grace = Charis (Greek) – the state of kindness and favor toward someone.

Grace – “unmerited divine assistance given human beings for their regeneration and sanctification.”
Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Mercy = eleo, eleos (Greek) – to have mercy on, to take pity, to show mercy to another who is in serious need.

Mercy – “kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly; kindness or help given to people who are in a very bad or desperate situation.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary

That is all of us human beings, Jew and Gentile alike. Because of our sin nature we are all in a very bad or desperate situation, in serious need of a Savior. It is only those who recognize that need and put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord who receive the mercy of God toward salvation.

Perhaps all this is best captured in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector found in the gospel of Luke:

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’*

¹³ *“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘**God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**’*

¹⁴ *“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Luke 18:9-14 (NIV)

These are the words of the great play write and poet William Shakespeare from *The Merchant of Venice*. These words of Shakespeare capture the essence of God's mercy expressed in Paul's writing here in Romans 11:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It drops as the gentle rain of heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesses him that gives and him that takes:
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch, better than his crown;
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute of awe and majesty.
Wherein does sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above the sceptered sway;
It is enthroned in the heart of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power does then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this –
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy.