



An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

(12) God Has Not Rejected Israel

Romans 11

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
September 16, 2018

Romans 11. Our text this morning is the 11th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. We are skimming through this letter one chapter at a time except for chapter 10 which took two sermons. This morning we are going to cover all of chapter 11.

This letter is Paul's summary of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ written to a regular congregation in the ancient world – a congregation that he had never meet at the time of writing. Of all of Paul's letters, it is the most systematic treatment of the good news of salvation. We have seen that there are a number of distinct sections in the letter. There is one on the need of salvation which deals with human sinfulness and the wrath of God because of that sin. There is one on justification by faith. There is one in which focuses mostly on the way of life that flows from salvation in Christ and the section we are in now deals with the problem raised by the fact that most of the people of Israel did not receive Jesus as their promised saviour and Messiah.

This was a problem for the early Christians because the people of Israel were God's chosen people and it was through them that salvation came to the world. But when Jesus was born of their number as the long-promised saviour, most of the Jews did not believe that he was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

One of the things that we have often seen in this study of Romans is that the good news of salvation is very much tied to the story of God and Israel told in the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul is always referring back to the Old Testament and this or that text or person to explain his

gospel but also to show how the gospel that he preached is the outworking of all kinds of Old Testament promises and anticipations. All of that shows that God was unfolding his plan for the salvation of the world through time – through many centuries. God revealed himself and his plans in and through history and that history is a very important part of the message – so much so that we often refer to it as the history of salvation. And it is because of this characteristic of the biblical gospel that the question of Israel and her failure to accept the gospel of Jesus is such a prominent concern in the New Testament.

This is why this question which at first glance seems to be far removed from our lives is so important for us. It has to do with the history of salvation and that history of salvation reveals to us all kinds of important insights about God and his way of working and his plans for the future of the world. So what God thinks about Israel and what his plans are for Israel is important for you because it teaches you about God who is the most important person in your life and it teaches you about his ways and his plans which are more important for you and for the whole world than whatever crisis or tempest in a teapot is dominating the headlines at the moment.

So, in chapters 9 and 10 we have been looking at this whole matter of Israel's rejection of the gospel and we have been introduced to God's way of choosing some people for salvation and choosing other people for damnation. That is one perspective on why so many in Israel did not accept Jesus. God had chosen them to be demonstrate his wrath rather than choosing them to demonstrate his saving grace. Chapter 9 emphasizes God's sovereign prerogative to choose some of salvation and others for damnation. Chapter 10, on the other hand, gives a different perspective, namely that the reason that so many of Israel did not respond to the gospel was because of their own ignorant clinging to the error of trying to earn their own salvation through keeping the law and because they were a stubborn and rebellious people. Chapter 10 emphasizes the stubbornness and the sinfulness of the Jews as the reason for their rejection of Jesus. And when we looked at that chapter we found many riches and wonderful truths about the wonderful way that God saves sinners.

Well today we deal with Israel's future and again we learn a number of wonderful things about God - what kind of God he is and what he has planned for the future of the world. The first point made in this chapter is that God had not rejected Israel as his people in spite of the fact that they had once again rejected him. They had done that many times in their history. And now they had done it climactically by rejecting the Son of God when he came to them to be their salvation. And so, the natural question to ask at this point is "has God rejected his people." And Paul's answer is an emphatic "no!" "By no means!" From the discussion that follows in chapter 11 it is clear that there are a number of perspectives to Paul's explanation of the fact that God had not rejected his people.

First of all, he points to himself. He says, "God has not rejected his people because he chose me, and I am one of them." That there was even one Israelite who embraced Jesus is apparently significant in showing that God had not rejected his people. He had rejected many of them, but he had not rejected all of them because there was at least one who had been saved – Paul himself.

But then he moves to the doctrine of the remnant. Verses 2-6 refers to the idea that there had always been a small number of Jews who were faithful to God. In the time of Elijah, at a very dark time in his life, Elijah had complained to God that he was the only faithful Israelite left, but God had told him that there were 7000 people beside him who had not worshipped the heathen god, Baal, and had remained faithful to the true God.

That is the idea of a faithful remnant and Paul writes in verse 5, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." God has always had his remnant of faithful believers chosen by grace. Much of the time in the history of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation, there had only been a remnant of people who were faithful to God, but through the remnant God's truth would continue to move through time and there were always enough of them for God to fulfill his purposes through them.

Verses 7-10 brings in the idea of hardening. This has been a fairly common theme in the history of God's dealings with his people. God's

plan for the salvation of the world involves times when he hardens the hearts of a great many of his covenant people. This is always a judicial hardening – which means it is always a punishment on sinful covenant people for hardening their own hearts against God. And there is a lot of this going on in Israel's history. Remember Isaiah's commission to preach the gospel to the people of God. Isaiah 6:9-10: God says to the prophet Isaiah, "Go and say to this people: keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed." Isaiah's commission was to go and preach to the people of Israel in order to harden their hearts. Jesus picks up on this and repeats it during his ministry and now Paul is doing the same.

Again, we are confronted with a truth of God's word that is difficult for us to accept, but we must remember what Paul said in chapter 9 when he taught us that God is the potter and we are the clay. The potter has the right to make one pot for honorable use and another for dishonorable use. Hardening hearts is one of the things that God does to those who have been fashioned for dishonorable use. But we must also remember that God hardens those who have hardened their own hearts against God. It is an act of judgment upon them for hardening their own hearts. That does not answer all of our questions, but it is something that the Bible emphasizes. The judgment of God against people is never arbitrary and always just. People get what they deserve, and they are never treated unfairly or unjustly.

Now beginning with verse 11 in Romans 11, Paul gives a further perspective on the fact that so many of the Jews did not accept Jesus. There is a relationship between the failure of the majority of the Jews to receive the gospel that is rooted in Jesus and the granting of that salvation to the Gentiles. Verse 11 says, "through their [the Jews] trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles...." And in verse 12 Paul writes that Israel's "trespass means riches for the world." And in verse 15 he writes that "their rejection means the reconciliation of the world...."

So, there is a connection between the rejection of the gospel by the Jews and the granting of salvation to the Gentiles. But the reason for this is very significant. God did this to “make Israel jealous” (verse 11). Paul makes the same point in verses 13-14. At least one of the purposes for his ministry to the Gentiles was “in order to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them.”

Now this offers a very interesting perspective on the history of salvation and on the way that God works out his purposes in history. Think back of God’s choice of Abraham and the offspring of Abraham way back in Genesis. One of the primary reasons for that choice is that through them the rest of the world might be blessed. God’s choice of Israel to be his people always had as one of its purposes the salvation of the Gentiles, the rest of the world. And now in Romans 11 we read that God hardened the majority of the Jews as a means of bringing salvation to the Gentiles. But one of the reasons for that was that the Jews might become jealous and turn to the Lord. So, Jews were chosen so that through them the world would be blessed, and the Gentiles were chosen so that through them the Jews would be blessed. It is God’s intention that the salvation of the Gentiles will make the Jews jealous so that they will return to the Lord.

One of the points that this highlights is that those who are chosen by God for salvation are always chosen partly in order to bless others. The Jews were chosen to be God’s people to be a blessing to the nations and now in New Testament times the Gentiles are chosen for salvation to make the Jews jealous and bring them to salvation. This is a key principle that belongs to the whole biblical doctrine of election. God chooses people because of his love for them and in order to bless them. That is a glorious part of the doctrine of election. But another key aspect of the doctrine of election is that God always chooses to bless the people he chooses so that they can be a blessing for others. We are never chosen solely for our own good. We are always chosen both so that we might be blessed and so that we might be a blessing to others. That is what is going on here in Romans 11. First God chose the Jews so that through them the Gentiles might be blessed and then after Christ had come God chose the Gentiles so that the Jews might become jealous of them and so come to salvation.

This principle is really important for our thinking about our own election and our own salvation. Our salvation is never just about us. It is about us – wonderfully so, but it is never just about us. It is always also about being a blessing to others – it is always about being a conduit of salvation to others. As people who are chosen by God for salvation we are to live by the power of the gospel in such a way as to make others jealous – including the Jews. This is one of the reasons for the Christian church that is made up largely of Gentiles – that is non-Jews – to live in such a way by the power of the gospel so that the Jews will become jealous and be attracted to Jesus Christ. This all belongs to the unfolding of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

And what Paul goes on to say is that what is to come is much more glorious than what has already come. Notice how Paul speaks of what he has planned for the Jewish people. Listen to verse 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!” And verse 15, “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”

You see God is not yet finished with the Jewish people. That is an important part of the answer to the conundrum of the Jewish rejection of Jesus. Remember how Paul introduced this chapter. “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!” Part of the evidence that God has not rejected his people is that all the way along there has been a remnant who have remained faithful to God. There was a remnant of Jews who accepted Jesus as well. But another part of the evidence that God has not rejected his people is what he still has in store for them. The history of salvation is not yet finished. God’s plan is not yet complete. And what has yet to come involves a great ingathering of the Jewish people.

Paul spells this out towards the end of this chapter. Verses 25-26, “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. And in this way all Israel will be saved.” He then quotes an Old Testament promise addressed to Israel and he continues in verse 28-32, “As regards the gospel, they are

enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”

So if we take the long view of the history of God’s plan for the salvation of the world, we have a long period of time when the Jews are set apart in order to be a blessing to the rest of the world and we have a long period of time in which many of the Gentiles are saved to make the Jews jealous and this this will one day result in the Jews coming to salvation in Christ in a big way so that Paul can say, “And in this way all Israel will be saved....” (Verse 26).

Now one of the reasons that Paul gives this whole perspective in this context is to keep the Gentiles from becoming arrogant and looking down their noses at the Jews. That is the thrust of verses 16-24. In that section Paul speaks of the Jewish people using the imagery of an olive tree. He says that some of the branches were broken off of that olive tree and that the Gentile converts were grafted into that olive tree. The Jewish people who have rejected Jesus are the branches that have been broken off and the Gentile people who have believed in Jesus are the wild branches who have been grafted in.

And Paul says to the Gentile believers, verse 18, “[D]o not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember that it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you.” So, Paul is saying to Gentile believers, “Do not look down upon the Jews because so many of them have rejected Jesus. Remember that you have been grafted into a Jewish olive tree. The root that supports you is a Jewish root. So, don’t be arrogant towards the branches.

What this means is that we who are Gentiles are never to forget that the Christian faith is rooted in the Jewish people. When we become Christians through faith in Jesus Christ we become sons and daughters of Abraham. The whole Old Testament is thoroughly Jewish. Our father Abraham was the beginning of the Jewish people and Jesus was a Jew as

well. The root that supports us is thoroughly Jewish. “[R]emember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you.” We must not look down on Jews for rejecting Jesus. We must not be arrogant towards them. We must remember that we share a kinship with them and that they are still regarded in a special way by God.

And Paul continues that we should fear because “if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you” (verse 21). He gives a solemn warning against falling away from the Lord. The Jewish people who did not believe in Jesus will be condemned. But Paul stresses, so will Gentiles who fall away from Jesus. Verse 22, “Note then the kindness and 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.”

Pride and arrogance do not fit well with the Christian faith. In all kinds of ways, God seeks to put us in our place. We are never to look down on others. We are always to remember that any blessing to us comes through the grace of God. We must never forget how weak that we are and that there is always the danger of us falling away from the Lord. It is true that God promises to keep his own, but that does not stop him from warning his own that if they fall away they will be cut off. That is another one of those tensions in Scripture. Don’t solve it or you end up with a heresy. And never let one side of a tension cancel out the other side. Let Scripture say what it says. If you do not continue in God’s kindness, you too will be cut off.

And “Note then the kindness and severity of God.” God is kind. God is severe. If you emphasize one at the expense of the other you have created an idol and have departed from the God of Scripture. Huge swaths of the Christian church have forsaken the God of Scripture by emphasizing the kindness of God at the expense of his severity. The God of the Bible is both kind and severe and woe to us if we do not love and confess the God who reveals himself in the Bible and turn instead to a god that we have fabricated because we prefer kindness over severity.

And now comes the climax of this section and probably also of the whole first 11 chapters of the letter. “Verses 33-36, “Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are

his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

I want you to notice that this exclamation of praise and wonder at God comes from delight and astonishment at God and the grand plan that he is working out in the history of the world. What Paul is reveling in here is not just his own salvation, but the big picture of what God is doing for the salvation of the world. We have seen a number of times in our study of Romans how our salvation is rooted in a story that begins with God's promises to Abram and indeed it is rooted in the promise that God made to Adam and Eve right after the fall. But in Romans and in the New Testament in general the focus is on God's promises to Abraham and his offspring.

The Christian faith is about the big picture of what God has done and is doing and is still going to do. It is about this thrilling plan that Paul has just outlined of how God chose the Jews to be a blessing to the world and how after Jesus had come and ascended to heaven how God chose the Gentiles so that they might be a blessing to the Jews and how God will one day bring in the Jews so that in the end all Israel will be saved. That never means every single person. But it does mean something. And it seems clear from this passage that there is a time coming when vast numbers of Jewish people will come to Christ so that it will be said that all Israel has been saved.

This is about how God is working in history. This is about how the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus is a cosmic salvation and involves the whole of history and the whole world. It is about how God is working through all the free actions of individuals and people groups to bring about his glorious purposes all to the praise of his kindness and his severity. As Paul puts it in verse 36, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."

Your salvation is part of that big picture. It is an important part of that big picture because our God is a God who counts the hairs on our heads and who cares for us in the uniqueness of our joys and sufferings and peculiarities and struggles. But it not all about us. It is about something

that is so much bigger than any of us. We are part of something that encompasses all of history and all of time and space. The vision of the Bible is cosmic in nature. It is what God is doing through all of history past, present and future. And a huge part of what it means to glorify God is to be enthralled with the vast thing that God is doing in the history of salvation.

That is what propelled this wonderful doxology from the heart and the lips and the pen of the apostle Paul. There are times when he rejoices in his own salvation. But what drives his life and his passion is so much bigger than his own salvation. It is this grand vision of what God is doing for the salvation of the world and the renewal of the whole universe. And by his writings, not the least in chapter 11 of Romans, he is encouraging us to follow his lead.

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!”

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”