

All Age: Romans 11: 1-36 All Israel Will Be Saved

During my teacher training course, I studied a lot of maths. One of those courses was called geometric topology, which, as far as I could make out, consisted basically of studying shapes which do not exist- at least not in the real world. It was so confusing that for the first 4 weeks the lecturer seemed to be speaking a foreign language which I did not understand at all. My friends and I sat there trying hard not to laugh because it all seemed so ridiculous. And then somewhere towards the end of week 4 I started to understand what we had been studying in week one. That carried on for the whole course so by the end of it I understood most of it, but by no means all of it.

By the end of today we will have looked at 3 of the most challenging chapters in the New Testament: Romans 9, 10 and 11. And whilst I hope you have understood it all, by the end of today I hope you will have at least grasped some of the basics and will want to go back over it again and again to plumb the depths of these complex but vital chapters.

So let me start with a summary.

In chapter 9 Paul asks the question why the Jews had not all believed in Jesus. Paul's answer is that salvation depends on God's sovereign choice and that only those whom God chooses, or elects, for salvation are saved. Whilst his answer may have been initially a little unsettling, when we fully grasped it we saw in it the wonder of God's grace. Because despite the fact that all people are guilty and deserve God's wrath God does save some, and those he saves he never lets go of. The whole upshot of chapter 9 is that whilst we are completely responsible for our condemnation, God is solely responsible for our salvation.

In chapter 10 Paul explains how so many Jews refused to trust in Jesus. He explains that whilst they sought God fervently, most of them doggedly refused to be saved by grace. In their pride and arrogance they sought God on their own terms and so hardened themselves towards God, something which God then confirmed by his own hardening.

If you remember, we also caught a glimpse of the patience and grace of God as he persistently calls rebels to humble themselves to find forgiveness, and the importance in that process of the proclamation of the gospel message through preaching and witnessing which is the means by which people hear the good news of Jesus.

And today in Chapter 11 Paul has asked another question: is that it for Israel? Has their chance gone? To which Paul responds with an emphatic "NO!"

In verses 1 to 10 he gives four reasons why there is still hope for the Jew.

Paul's first reason is to point to himself, a Jew, who now follows Christ as Lord. He is one of many examples he could have pointed to show that not all Jews have rejected Christ so it obviously isn't a blanket ban. Paul is saved so obviously other Jews can be saved too!

Secondly he reminds his readers of God's faithfulness to his promises but telling them that God never rejects those whom he 'foreknew' or elected to be his. There's no reason to expect that God would refuse to call people from Jewish backgrounds to himself, as he done so all along. And since those he calls do come, there will be some Jewish people in Paul's and future generations who will also come to faith in Christ.

Paul's third answer is that even when things looked totally grim, time and time again God saved a remnant. He uses the example of Elijah to show that. If you remember Elijah, after defeating the prophets of Baal on the mountain, thought he was alone, but God told him that there were 7000 others who had never worshipped the false god Baal. And if that was the case at one of the bleakest times of Israel's history, surely we should expect God continue to save a remnant out of every generation!

And there is hope for the Jew fourthly because salvation has always been by God's grace and not by works; a grace which he pours out on the undeserving - both Jews and Gentiles . Tim Keller explains it this way *"what guarantees that there will always be a faithful remnant is not that there is always a set of good, decent people who will believe, but rather that there is always the grace of God. It is God who preserves a remnant. Those who believe do so entirely because of his grace."* Salvation is and has always been God's business, and it's a business he will continue in until Jesus comes again.

Four great reasons why God hasn't finished with Jewish people yet!

Now you might be wondering what this all has to do with us – after all very few of us, if any, are from a Jewish background. But whilst most of this chapter may seem to focus on Israel or the Jewish people, this whole chapter is in fact written for us. If you remember Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome, a church, if you recall which was largely but not exclusively Gentile. In a short while he'll apply show these four lessons of hope to us, but when Paul gets to verse 11 the history of Israel suddenly becomes part of our history too, as Paul sets out 3 stages of gospel growth as the message of Jesus was preached from Jerusalem to Judea to the ends of the earth.

Strangely Paul's starting point for the spread of the gospel and growth of the church was the rejection of the gospel by Israel. We read that clearly in the gospel, don't we, when most of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law reject Jesus and plot to have him killed. And although many thousands came to faith in Jesus after his resurrection and on the Day of Pentecost, the majority of Jewish people did reject the gospel message. But rather than being a defeat, Paul points out that their rejection of the gospel led directly to stage two, when many Gentiles became Christians.

And if you read through the Book of Acts you can see those things happening. As the gospel message went out from Jerusalem there was a repeated pattern. The gospel was preached in a local synagogue; some Jews believed but many became hostile; the apostles then left the synagogue and went to Gentile homes and halls and preached to them; and many Gentiles became Christians, leaving the church as a multi-ethnic body but, as time went on, with more Gentiles than Jews.

And Paul's point is that the rejection of the gospel by the Jews was fundamental to the gospel being preached to the Gentiles and the Gentiles coming to faith. If the Jews had all believed in Jesus what would have happened? Would there have been the same level of desire to go out to the rest of the world with the good news of Jesus? Surely there's a chance that those early apostles would have thought that the gospel was simply a means for the renewal of Israel and not for the salvation of the world? But when the Jews rejected the good news they went and preached to the Gentiles who gladly accepted it. And that's Paul's point: the rejection of the gospel by the Jews brought life to the Gentiles who heard and believed the good news.

That was stage two: an increasingly Gentile church taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, as it still is today almost 2000 years later. But Paul is clear that God hasn't finished with his Old Testament people yet. From verse 25 to 32 he explains that there is a third stage; a time of revival amongst the Jewish

people, perhaps just before Jesus' final return, when huge numbers will turn back to God and place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

Now lots of Christians get tied up in knots about these verses and read into them things which really are not there. So let me be clear: Paul is not talking about the restoring of the nation state of Israel to its original Old Testament borders. Nor is he speaking about the Jewish nation becoming a world power once again. Neither is Paul saying that all Jewish people are saved simply because of their Jewish heritage as if there were two ways to be saved – to be Jewish or to be a Christian. Yes the Jewish people can rightly say that are loved and chosen and have a unique calling in salvation history. But Paul has been abundantly clear throughout this letter that for Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, the only way by which we can be saved is by faith alone in Christ alone and that, of course, is all by God's grace alone and not by works so that no one, whatever their mortality or heritage, can boast.

Paul's expectation of a great turning to Christ and that phrase in verse 26 that '*all Israel will be saved,*' are instead further signs of God's amazing grace. Even after so many centuries of disobedience God has not forgotten his promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Paul is using the word '*all*' here in the same way that we might talk about the UK voting for Brexit. The majority did, but that doesn't mean each and every person voted the same way. So I don't believe Paul thought that each and every Jew alive at the time of revival would become a Christian, but that many, many, perhaps even a majority, would do so. So despite their centuries-long antipathy to Jesus the Lord's hands are still outstretched to the Jewish people calling them to come in to him repentance and faith. And one day, Paul says, they will come in huge numbers.

And it's with this timeline in mind that Paul has some warnings and encouragements for his Gentile readers. That's the chunk that comes from verses 13 down to 24, although it's reflected in the latter part of the chapter as well.

And the warnings are these: don't look down on the Jews and despise them because they are loved on account of the patriarchs. And don't be arrogant, because if God didn't spare those who shared in his covenants with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but who rejected the gospel of grace, he will not spare Gentiles either.

And to help his readers understand he uses the analogy of an olive tree with roots deep down into the ancient covenants and promises of God. The branches of the olive tree stand for the people God has drawn to himself by faith across the ages. Originally they were the children of the promises given through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were the ones given the covenants, the land, the Law and the commands for tabernacle worship. And it was to these disobedient people that God sent the prophets and kings and before whom he performed great signs and wonders to encourage them to put their faith in him alone. And of course it was into this race that the saviour was born. What amazing privileges those are!

And yet despite all this, many of God's covenant people rejected him. They hardened their hearts and either disobeyed his laws and sought after other gods or sought to attain righteousness by works and not by faith. And what happened? Those who chased after foreign gods or who rejected the gospel of salvation by faith alone were then rejected by God and so many of those natural olive branches, Jewish people who had such fantastic privileges, were cut off.

Sadly throughout history there have been many times when people who called themselves Christians have seen the way the Jews rejected Jesus and have hated and despised them in return. One doesn't just have to look as far back as the Crusades to see Jews being hated and attacked by people who are claiming the

name of Jesus Christ. Even growing up I can remember Jews being referred to as Jesus killers, and there is plenty of anti-Semitic feeling still around today.

But there is no excuse for Christians ever feeling or behaving like that! Paul has just explained that it was precisely because the Jews at the time rejected Jesus that the gospel went out to the Gentiles. Without the Jew's rejection of the gospel we might not be here! What's more, their failures in the past do not in any way rob them of their rich and divine heritage. They are still heirs to the promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They are still the ones who were given the covenants and the Commandments. They are still the ones to whom the prophets originally spoke. They are still the ones who share the same nationality as Jesus. Those are amazing privileges, so we should never look down on the Jews! Particularly since God's promises and call to them are irrevocable.

And because of that we should love them so much that we want to share with them the greatest news there is; news that the Messiah has come, that he did fulfil the law's requirements, and the salvation is available to all who trust in him! After the atrocities of the Second World War, many Christians have felt embarrassed speaking to Jewish people about Jesus but if we have any love for them at all we should not be frightened. Jesus was a Jew and his life and death, properly understood, fulfil the Law and offer real life and hope to the Jew as to the Gentile.

But as well as avoiding hatred or looking down on Jewish people, neither should we be arrogant. Whereas the Jews were the natural branches of the olive tree you and I, as Gentiles, are the wild branches! Like the Jews we are sinners. Like the Jews we can only come to God through faith in Jesus. But whilst their heritage fits in perfectly with God's great plan of salvation revealed across the ages, we are not a natural fit onto this ancient olive tree. But whilst we don't really seem to belong, by his grace alone God calls us and saves us and grafts us on to the ancient covenant tree: outsiders welcomed and brought into the family. But here's the warning: if God was prepared to cut off so many of his Old Testament people because they would not come to him in faith then we should not presume on or take for granted the grace and mercy of God.

Paul isn't saying that we should doubt our salvation. Those God calls he saves and justifies and glorifies: there can be no doubt about that! Paul is saying that we should always remember that we are saved by grace alone and not start to think it's because we are special or have earned that prize for ourselves. Just because so few Jews have become followers of Jesus should never make us think that we are any more deserving than they of God's glorious grace.

Paul also wants us to realise that if Gentiles like us, wild olive shoots, can be grafted onto the original covenant tree, then how easy will it be for those who are naturally children of that covenant to be re-grafted in if they respond to the gracious invitation of God.

Is there hope for the Jews? Yes! A great deal of hope! God has not finished calling his Old Testament people to him yet!

In view of all these things Paul's advice is for us in verse 22 is to stop and consider the sternness of God to those who reject him but also the kindness of God to all who come in faith, both Jew and Gentile, those natural olive branches as well as the wild olive branches. And both those facets of God's character should spur us on in mission shouldn't they? If we only think on God's wrath we will be fearful of God and miss out on the warmth of his Fatherly love towards us and the intimacy he offers. And if we only think on God's kindness we will lose sight of the urgency to pass on the good news of Jesus to those who are perishing.

Don't you have people you love who are facing God's wrath? I do. Don't you desire that they come to know Christ and experience his love and mercy for themselves? I know I do! And if God hasn't given up on Jewish people who for so many centuries have turned their backs on him, can't we also hope for his grace and mercy to be poured out on those in our own families too? Of course we can!

There is so much more I could say from this passage but let me finish with Paul's final thought and it's one of praise and worship.

Even the great apostle Paul seems to acknowledge in verses 33 to 36 that these difficult ideas are, to a great extent, beyond our comprehension. It's as if we are seeing things from below, catching just a glimpse of the glorious workings of God in salvation, where as God sees everything, with 20-20 divine vision, from above.

Just like my geometric topology class we may only grasp a little of God's wonderful plan of salvation and right now we may see as in a darkened glass. But the little God has revealed to us and the part of that we are able to understand should point us firmly to the power, the majesty, the wisdom, the righteousness and the undeserved extravagant mercy of God poured out on sinful people like you and me. *"For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen."*