

What About Israel? (Part 3)

Text: Romans 11:1-36

Series: Book of Romans [#14]

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Theme: **Faithful, Sovereign God Is Not Done With Israel.**

Introduction

Last week we looked at human responsibility in salvation in Romans chapter 10. The vast majority of the Jewish people were missing salvation because they had a distorted view of God's truth, were trying to build their own righteousness by works, and because they were stumbling over Christ rather than building on Him as their cornerstone. Paul spelled out the process of coming to faith, the truth we need to know and the necessity of true faith. The chapter closes as Paul picks up God's word about Israel through Isaiah, "All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people" (21).

A logical question then is, "Is this the way it will always be?" "Has God moved on to the church and left Israel in the dust?" Chapter 11 closes this three-chapter section with Paul writing about Israel's future. The message of this chapter is that *faithful, sovereign God is not done with Israel*. Paul begins with...

The Extent Of Israel's Rejection Of Christ.

First he tells us is that Israel's rejection is partial, not total. The opening question in verse 1 is "God has not rejected His people [Israel], has He?" The immediate answer is "May it never be!" While as a group they have rejected Christ, God has not rejected them. "Don't even consider that!" Paul says. "It's not possible. God is faithful to His word. He has *not* rejected Israel." Paul is underscoring what he wrote earlier in 3:3. "What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?"

Paul illustrates his strong answer first with himself. Look at the second part of verse 1. "I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Paul is saying, "Remember, God is still saving Jews, *like me!* So, He has not rejected us." Martin Luther wrote "had God cast away His people [Israel], then above all He would have cast away the Apostle Paul, who had opposed Him with all his might."¹

Then Paul moves from the his own example and time to a general principle: God has always been faithful to keep a remnant of true believers in Israel. His example in verses 2-4 is the prophet Elijah and the evil days in which he lived. Paul went back to this incident which took place over 900 years earlier, as recorded in 1 Kings 19. Ahab was king over Israel. 1 Kings 16 tells us Ahab "did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him" (30). His great evil included instituting the worship of the Baals, the false, manmade Canaanite gods. God sent Elijah to challenge the prophets of Baal to a demonstration which would show who is the true God. When God worked a dramatic victory which turned the people back to Him, King Ahab's wife Jezebel was furious and set

out kill Elijah. Frightened, he took off south into Judah for safety. When God came to him there, Elijah said to Him, “I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” Then God told him he was not the only one. God had preserved 7,000 who were still true to Him. God has graciously and faithfully always ensured there is a remnant of people in Israel who are true to Him.

We see this in the Jewish people today. The American Jewish Committee estimated that the world Jewish population was 13.2 million in 2006, including 5.3 million in Israel, 5.3 million in the United States, and 374,000 in Canada.² It is difficult to get an accurate number of Jewish people who have accepted Christ as Savior. Estimates of Messianic Jews, that is, those who have accepted Christ and retain much of the Jewish culture and forms of worship, include 10,000 in Israel, or less than 0.2% of the Jewish population there;³ and anywhere from 100,000 way up to 250,000 in the U.S., or from about 1.9% to 4.7% of the Jewish population there.⁴ If we extrapolate the U.S. percentage to Canada, it would translate to 7,000 to 17,500 Messianic Jews here. The remnant is small. But it demonstrates that Israel’s rejection is partial, not total.

Secondly, Israel’s rejection of Christ is temporary, not permanent. Paul states the possibility of Israel’s restoration to true faith in verses 23-24.

“And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?”

In Paul’s day the normal process of grafting olive trees to get the best production was to take shoots from cultivated trees that were productive and graft them onto a more vigorous but not fruitful wild olive stock. In some cases the reverse was done but, as Paul states here, that was “contrary to nature.”⁵ Paul is saying if God grafted Gentiles, wild shoots, into the cultivated tree, He certainly is able to graft the Jewish people back into His tree. Their restoration is possible.

But Israel’s restoration is not just possible, it is certain. Go back up to verse 12. “Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!” Drop down to verse 15. “For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” A future Israel will be saved. As God said through Isaiah,

- “you [Israel] will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.” (60:16)
- Again, “And it will be said in that day, ‘Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.’” (25:9)

In the book of Zechariah God tells us,

“I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.”
(12:10)

Paul continues this on into verse 26 telling us “and so all Israel will be saved.” The meaning of the two words “all Israel” has raised unending discussion and disagreement. Briefly, Paul has been talking about the nation of Israel as a whole, which is clearly the case in verse 25. So, he continues to speak about the nation as a whole in verse 26, not just the faithful remnant. Having this in view, there are two basic options:

- either Paul is saying that when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, that when God’s work which the apostle Peter described in Acts 15:14 as “taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name” is complete, then every individual of Israel at that time will come to faith in Christ;
- or, that the nation as a whole, but not every individual will come to faith in Christ at that time.

The phrase “all Israel” is used in the Old Testament in both these way. It was used at times for the nation as a whole, but not every person in it. For example, Joshua 7 tells us about a man named Achan and his family who had violated God’s ban on taking things from the people they defeated in battle. Verse 25 records their judgment. “*All Israel* stoned them with stones...” Achan and his family, obviously, were not stoned by each and every one of the two million or so Israelites, but by the nation *as a whole, collectively*. Taking it as either every individual or the nation as a whole fits the language Paul uses. The main point is not affected by which option we choose: Israel’s restoration is not just possible, it is certain.

Faithful, Sovereign God Is Not Done With Israel. Let’s move on to ...

The Results Of Israel’s Rejection Of Christ.

One result was and still is rich blessings to the Gentiles. Take note of three descriptions of these blessings—

- Verse 11. “I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles...” The blessing of salvation.
- In verse 15 he writes that “their rejection is the reconciliation of the world ...” The blessing of reconciliation.
- And verse 17. “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root

of the olive tree.” The blessing of being grafted in.

Gentiles could and did come to faith in God before Christ during Israel’s history and their unique relationship with Him. But the salvation, reconciliation, being grafted in came as the person came by faith to God through Israel, by becoming one of them. Now we have the rich blessing of coming to God by faith in Christ alone.

We see this worked out in Paul’s ministry. For example, as he preached the gospel on the Sabbath to Jews in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch in the Galatian region, Luke tells us,

“But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, “I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles, that You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.” When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.’” (Acts 13:45-48)

But along with the rich blessings, there also is the result of a warning to the Gentiles. Let’s read Paul’s warning to Gentiles, starting in verse 17.

“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.” (17-22)

The apostle Peter was correct. In Paul’s letters there “are some things which are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:15). There are several of those hard to understand things in Romans 11, and this is one of them.

We don’t have time today to delve into, and perhaps get lost in all the details and difficulties here. The first thing you need to know is that I have not answered to my satisfaction all the tough questions I have of this passage, and so what I say may not satisfy

you either. We need to start by noting that Paul is using an analogy, an illustration to make a point. And so, while we believe in the literal, true natural sense of every word of Scripture, we must not press the details of the analogy beyond his intended central point. We should not, as the old and true guideline for interpreting parables states, make this illustration *walk on all fours*.

The natural branches cut off the tree were Jews who rejected Christ. They had never placed their faith in Christ as Savior. So their judgment of being cut off did not mean losing salvation, but losing their place, opportunities and privileges of being connected to the truth and work of God that came through God's covenant with Abraham. That judgment was not loss of salvation.

Who are the wild olive branches now grafted in? Gentiles, certainly. If Paul is keeping his analogy balanced—and he does not always do that—being a branch in this illustration may refer to Gentiles as a class of people now having the place, opportunities and privileges of being connected to, having access to the truth and work of God, not just to believers. This blessing, of course, leads to salvation for all God has chosen, for all who chose to believe.

In any event, I do not believe salvation is the subject here. On that matter Paul has already spoken clearly. Back in chapter 8, those people God has chosen He also has called, justified and glorified. That is His sovereign irrevocable work (8:28-30). And, to reinforce and emphasize that, he went on to tell us that nothing, that no one can separate us from God, from His love in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:38-39).

What is clear is that Paul is talking about God's certain judgment on the sinful arrogance of any Gentile thinking that he or she is now better than a Jewish person since the nation has rejected Christ. All that we are and have is by God's grace. Just as the pride and arrogance of Jews against Gentiles is sin which God judges, so also the pride and arrogance of Gentiles against Jews is sin which He judges. Gentiles may lose their privilege of having a connection, having open access to God and His truth.

The last result of Israel's rejection of Christ we find here is the restoration God will bring to the Jews. This may sound strange and even illogical at first. It seems strange and illogical to me that most trips of less than 50 minutes are faster by bicycle than by car. Yet, apparently, that is true ... at least in Tokyo.⁶ We'll have to talk with the Yui's to verify that.

Yes, one result of Israel's rejecting Christ is God's eventual restoration of them. We have already seen that Israel's rejection of Christ is temporary and that one day they will turn to Him. Now go to verse 11.

“I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, *to make them jealous.*”

Then to verse 13.

“But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as

I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow
*I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of
them.*" (13-14)

In His sovereign grace and mercy God has chosen to use Israel's sin of rejecting their Messiah to draw them back to Himself. The gospel has gone to the Gentiles without them, not through them. But rather than this being a point of no return for Israel, their rejection was the first step on the path back to God. God has used this grace of saving and blessing the Gentiles to stir up a deep desire for Him among the remnant. Paul was motivated by this plan of God as he reached out to his fellow-Jews.

When the time of the fullness of the Gentiles has come, Israel's desire for knowing Christ as the Gentiles do will be one of God's instruments to draw them to Himself, to save "all Israel." Yes, make no mistake about it, *faithful, sovereign God is not done with Israel.*

Paul has wrapped up what we call the doctrinal section of this letter and will move on to the implications and applications in chapter 12. How did he respond to these great truths which God had shown him? How should we respond to them? We see that at the end of the chapter.

The Response To Faithful, Sovereign God's Revelation.

I picture Paul, having finished dictating these eleven chapters, stepping back, pausing, reviewing the truths God has shown him about the gospel.

- The truth that we all need the gospel because we all are sinners, condemned before God.
- That neither the Law nor anything else we follow or do can make us righteous.
- That God has provided the remedy in Jesus Christ who died and was raised from the dead for us. Salvation is God's free gift of grace through faith.
- In fact, the only way to become righteous has always been by faith in God and His revealed truth.
- So Gentiles and Jews now are on equal footing.
- All of us who are saved are freed from slavery to sin so we can serve God.
- Those whom God has chosen He has called, justified and glorified.
- Nothing can separate Christ's sheep, God's people from Him.
- Along with this sovereignty of God there is our responsibility and accountability to God for accepting or rejecting Him.
- And even though Israel rejected their long awaited Messiah, God is faithful. *He is not done with Israel.*

Taking in some of the greatness and beauty of these truths, Paul now bursts into praise. As it is often said, his theology becomes doxology. He cries out,

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?” (33-35)

God’s wisdom and knowledge are perfect. He never has had to learn anything. Think of His wisdom in salvation just from one aspect. The aspect of His sovereign choice and our responsibility. No wonder Paul says God’s judgments are unsearchable, that we cannot follow them back to their source and so fully understand them. God and His knowledge, wisdom, ways and judgments are way beyond our ability to comprehend.

In thinking about all this, Paul did what we should do—He acknowledged and accepted them by faith and then joyfully worshiped God with all his heart. It is when we do this that we can turn to and trust God who understands all the things in our lives we cannot understand, including the disappointments and disasters, the attacks and agonies.

As Paul did that he gave us an example of always giving God glory now here on earth as we will in heaven forever. His closing words, the benediction to this first grand section of Romans is in verse 36. “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” It is much like Paul words about Christ in Colossians 1:16,

“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.”

Why give God glory, why praise Him? Because He is the Source of all that exists, the Creator, the One who brought it all into being, and it all was created for Him. How then do we give God glory? After all, His is the glorious One? The first verse of Psalm 19 tells us the heavens constantly give glory to God. They do not add to God’s perfect, splendid holiness, but they display it. The grand Rocky Mountains and the smallest microbes alike point to God’s greatness, wisdom, power and beauty.

We exist to give Him glory. We do not add to God’s perfect, splendid holiness, but we are to display it. As His redeemed ones we display His splendid perfection by allowing Him to transform our character to be like that of Christ; by thinking, speaking and acting in line with that character so people can see Him in us, and so turn to and praise God. And so the question is, “Am I living in such a way that I showcase God’s glory?” If not, why not?

Conclusion.

Faithful, sovereign God is not done with Israel. It is easy at first glance to see these three chapters about Israel as history and theology—two of the least favorite subjects of many

people. “After all,” some say, “who wants to, who needs to study and remember those names, terms, doctrines, dates?” I hope you have seen that this section on Israel is not just history about a nation that you are not part of, nor is it just theology that doesn’t impact you today.

God is sovereign and faithful. Just as He has been and will be faithful to His word to Israel, so He is to you and me. There are times when God seems uninterested in us, seems to have forgotten about us, or even to have written us off. In those times, remember Israel—their past, present and future. Remember that just as God is faithful to them, so He is to you.

Thomas Obediah Chisholm is not a familiar figure. I suspect most of us may have never heard his name before. He was born in a log cabin in Kentucky in 1866. At age 21 he became an associate editor of a local weekly newspaper. It was not exactly a prestigious position, but he had the opportunity to do what he loved—to write. During his time in that job an evangelist came to town. Chisholm heard the gospel and received Christ as his Savior. He dedicated his life to serving God. The evangelist offered him the position of editing his denomination’s paper, which Chisholm accepted. But in just a few years, health problems forced him to leave the job. His health was a problem for the rest of his life (although he lived to be 93), and so he had a difficult life, unable to enjoy good health and earn an adequate living.

In 1923 sent some of his poems to W. M. Runyan at Moody Bible Institute and asked him to set them to music. One of those poems was based on his own years of experience and Lamentations 3, “The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”⁷

Just as God is faithful to and not done with Israel, so He is faithful to and not done with you and me. As you look to God now, thank Him that He is faithful as well as sovereign. Thank Him that He will fulfill His promises to Israel and to you. Commit yourself to trusting Him, and to be a showcase for His glory.

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- ¹ Martin Luther. *Commentary On Romans*. Trans. J. Theodore Mueller. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976, page 155.
- ² American Jewish Committee. "World Jewish Population, 2006." *ajcarchives.org*. <http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/AJYB615.CV.pdf>. Accessed 02 February 2010.
- ³ Matthew Wagner. "Religious Affairs: Jesus' Zionists." *Jerusalem & Religions*. <<http://www.jerusalem-religions.net/spip.php?article80>>, 30 April 2009. Accessed 02 February 2010.
- ⁴ e.g., compare (1) "20th Century Messianic Judaism." *City Of David*. <<http://www.cityofdavid.com/messianicjudaism-q&a-20thcentury.htm>>. Accessed 02 February 2010.
(2) Matthew Wagner. "Messianic Jews to protest 'discrimination'". *Jpost.com*. <<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1214132688698>>. Unable to access on 02 February 2010.
Article and estimate is cited in footnote No. 6 in "Messianic Judaism." *wikipedia.org*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messianic_Jews>. Accessed 02 February 2010.
- ⁵ e.g., (1) Leon Morris. *The Epistle To The Romans*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972, page 312.
(2) Douglas J. Moo. *The Epistle To The Romans*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996, pages 702-703.
- ⁶ <<http://www.strangefacts.com/facts1.html>>. Accessed 05 February 2010.
- ⁷ Wilbur Konkel. *Living Hymn Stories*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1982, pages 69-73.
George Beverly Shea, with Betty Swanberg and Jeffrey McKenzie. *How Sweet The Sound*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004, pages 24-27.
Kenneth W. Osbeck. *101 Hymn Stories: The Inspiring Stories Behind 101 Favorite Hymns*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992, pages 83-85.

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