

“ISRAEL, GOD’S PROMISES, AND UNEXPECTED FAVOR”
ROMANS 11:17-24

In Romans, Paul is establishing his credibility as an apostle and as a missionary. He wants the Roman church to be his sending church on his journey to Spain, and he is giving them his understanding of the gospel — man’s sin and lostness (chs. 1-3), God’s salvation (chs. 3-4), the Spirit’s sanctification (chs. 5-8), and God’s sovereignty over the whole process (chs. 9-11).

Much of Paul’s explanation of God’s sovereignty in salvation has focused on the nation of Israel and its relationship to salvation. Because Israel’s religious leadership rejected Christ (Mt. 13), and so few Israelites believed Christ, one might think that God has given up on Israel and changed his plan to developing a Gentile church (and excluding the Jews). In Romans 11, Paul clearly explains that God has not given up on Israel and that God is faithful to His promise to Israel. [Aside: The faithfulness of God that we see in this chapter is always an encouragement, but it seems particularly appropriate to think of it in these days of COVID-19.] So what about Israel and what about the church and what should we think about Israel and God’s promises? This morning’s passage teaches us that —

GOD’S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL IS BOTH A WARNING AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO BELIEVERS.

Paul’s premise: *the hardening of individual Israelites does not negate God’s promise to national Israel.*

1. Consider Israel and Be **WARNED (vv. 17-22)**

- ✓ Salvation is Always a Reason to Remember **HUMILITY** (vv. 17-18)
- ✓ Salvation is Always a Reason to Remember **FEAR** (vv. 19-21)
- ✓ Salvation is Always a Reason to Remember **GRACE** (v. 22)

2. Consider Israel and Be **ENCOURAGED (vv. 23-34)**

- ✓ Israel Can (and **WILL BE**) Grafted Back Into God’s Promises (v. 23)
- ✓ Israel Will **NOT** Be Cut Off (v. 24)

Lessons Learned:

Paul's premise: *the hardening of individual Israelites does not negate God's promise to national Israel.*

Verse 2 serves as the theme for this entire chapter. Paul's statement is simple, clear, and concise. His meaning is unmistakable, and it is repeated throughout the chapter:

- ✓ There is a remnant (v. 5)
- ✓ They did not stumble in a way that made them fall out of God's blessing (v. 11a)
- ✓ There will still be fulfillment of God's promises for them (v. 12)
- ✓ The hardening of the Israelites was for the purpose of grafting in Gentiles (v. 25; cf. v. 11b)
- ✓ The Deliverer will come and take away their sins and show them mercy (vv. 26-28, 31)
- ✓ No wonder Paul exclaims God's glory in his benediction in vv. 33-36.

1. Consider Israel and Be **WARNED** (vv. 17-22)

• Salvation is Always a Reason to Remember **HUMILITY** (vv. 17-18)

- ✓ Paul tells his readers and us that individual Israelites have been **broken off**. He is referring to those who rejected Christ and were hardened and condemned (vv. 7b-10).
 - Notice that he uses gracious understatement — **some**, when *most* had been broken off.
 - But that understatement also reminds us that the covenant with Israel is not removed — the **root** of the **olive tree** stands (v. 17). The promise to Abraham and Israel's patriarchs remains.
 - Paul could have picked any tree for his analogy, but chose the **olive tree**. The olive tree was common in the Mediterranean region, but also referred to Israel in the OT (Hos. 14:6).
- ✓ When Paul says **if...**, he is speaking of a certainty — **since...** He is speaking of two realities:
 - Some Israelite branches were **broken off** (individual Jews were condemned and not saved).
 - Gentiles were **grafted** into the promises of Israel —
 - ... I am no horticulturist, but I am told that wild branches are not grafted into cultivated trees, but that cultivated branches are grafted into wild trees. Some have suggested that Paul didn't know the image or that he was confused. He wasn't confused (v. 24 — he knows this is "contrary to nature"); he is using literary license to make his point — don't press details.
 - ... *Gentiles do not supplant Israel*, but they are **among them** (i.e., some saved Israelites remain)
 - ... *Gentiles do not supplant Israel*, but are **partakers with them** — they share in fellowship together with the Israelites who have been saved. They have communion together.
 - ... *Gentiles do not supplant Israel*, but are connected to the **rich root** — the "fatness" of the blessings of the promise made to Israel (Gen. 12:3) provides life for the Gentile believers.
- ✓ Paul has spoken of two realities — some individual Israelites won't experience the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant and Gentiles are given the gift of salvation to experience covenant blessings.

- ✓ Since both those things are true, Paul's warns, **do not** (STOP!) **be arrogant toward the branches**.
 - The word **arrogant** has the sense of triumph and victory — “we are greater than and have defeated you...” There is a temptation to spiritual pride for salvation. There is a particular temptation for spiritual pride and ethnic hatred *against the Jews* because some rejected.
 - *Don't be arrogant because* the only way any Gentile receives salvation is to be connected to the promise given to Abraham and Israel (the rich root). The root is still standing, and it (and only it) is the source of spiritual life for the grafted in branch.
 - *Don't be arrogant because* branches do not **support the root**... The branch is dependent on the root — the Gentile believer is dependent on the promises made to Israel. Branches are not self-sustaining; they are dependent on the root. Ultimately both Israel, and Gentile believers are dependent on the promise made to Abraham (Rom. 4:16-17) and the work of Christ (Jn. 15:4-5).
- ✓ Contemplation of our salvation should always lead us to humility — no one is saved because he is great or worthy; everyone is saved because he is needy and dependent. Everyone is saved by grace, and grace is only given to the needy, not the self-sufficient. That is true of Israel and of us.
- ✓ Let salvation lead you to a remembrance of your humble condition and status (Eph. 2:12).

• **Salvation is Always a Reason to Remember FEAR (vv. 19-21)**

- ✓ Some might object to what Paul has just said by asserting, **Branches were broken off**...
 - This is a prideful assertion that unbelieving Israelites are undeserving and inferior because they were removed from the blessings to the nation and condemned and not saved.
 - The claim of v. 19 is also a prideful assertion that there is some worthiness in the Gentile who is grafted into the promises — **so that**...
 - Ironically, even the objection points to the fact that not all the branches are removed, “branches” (i.e., some) — not “the branches” (i.e., all). Also, the root of the promise still stands and the Gentiles are placed *into* the promise, but *do not replace* the promise.
- ✓ Paul responds to the objection by saying, **Quite right** — that's true (as far as it goes) —
 - **They** (individuals, not the nation) **were broken off for unbelief** — they did not believe in the promise of the coming Messiah by faith. This was Jesus' criticism (Mt. 13:58; Mk. 6:6).
 - In contrast, the Gentiles (**you** is emphatic) **stand by faith** — they have their salvation only because of their faith in Christ. It is faith alone that saves them (Rom. 3:27ff; 4:5).
 - If it is only faith, then it is not works and there is no reason for pride and superiority.
- ✓ Then notice Paul's conclusion: **do not** (STOP!) **be conceited, but fear**...
 - They should stop cultivating attitudes of mind that are arrogant and proud. “To trust in God and be proud of one's spiritual achievement are mutually exclusive.” [Morris]
 - They should be in a constant state of fear (of God, v. 21). They should fear because God cut off individual Israelites and if He did that to “covenanted,” He will also do that to unbelieving Gentiles.

- ✓ Just as God is willing to pour out His wrath against unbelieving Israelites, He also is willing to condemn unrighteous Gentiles. He will not save Gentiles as an entire entity (neither Gentiles nor the church have supplanted Israel in God's plan). And He will not spare individual rebellious Gentiles from His wrath. That reality should lead us to live in fearful reverence of God (Lk. 12:5).

- Salvation is Always a Reason to Remember GRACE (v. 22)

- ✓ Because it is true that God has broken off unrighteous Jews and can (and will) break off unrighteous Gentiles from the promise of Abraham, we Gentiles should think (**behold**) in a particular way.
- ✓ His conclusion (**therefore**) is that we should look at (**behold**) and consider two realities of God:
 - **His kindness** — this is God's goodness and generosity to undeserving people. It is this patient kindness that leads to the salvation of undeserving people (Jews & Gentiles, 2:4). Notice who received this kindness — **you** (Gentiles, who were not directly part of the promise to Abraham).
 - **His severity** — “to cut off,” or “to cut short.” While the word is very rare, it obviously refers to God's wrath and condemnation. Notice who received this **severity** — **those who fell**, i.e., those Israelites who rejected Christ and rebelled against God and His gracious Abrahamic Covenant.
 - Both these attributes work together in perfect harmony.
 - It's appropriate to think of these attributes together because we are tempted to think of ourselves as worthy of God's kindness — “of course He is kind to me...” That we also consider His severity is a reminder, “He *should have been* wrathful against me, but He was gracious...”
- ✓ As we remember our salvation and Israel's position, our awareness should always be that our salvation is by God's grace alone — only. *We never merit grace in any way.* It's unexpected.
- ✓ That remembrance of grace should also remind us to continue living by grace. Because we have been saved from sin, we continue living in that way. Paul emphasizes that in the statement, ***if you continue in His kindness.***
 - He does not mean that our salvation is dependent on our obedience. If God has redeemed us, then we are secure in that redemption (Rom. 8:30).
 - But it is also true that those who are in that chain of salvation *will* demonstrate a life that is consistent in that salvation — the believer does not flaunt his right to sin “because God's grace is so great” (6:1-2). The one who has received great kindness lives as one transformed by that kindness (6:11-12, 14).
 - When Paul says, ***if you continue***, he means that some might and some might not. It is no guarantee that all who claim faith in Christ really are saved by Christ. The one who has received kindness responds by living a life congruent with that kindness (Col. 1:22-23).
- ✓ There is a warning about not living this way — ***you will also be cut off***; if rebellious Israelites were, then so will rebellious Gentiles be cut off from the promises to Abraham.
- ✓ So in vv. 19-22, Paul is reminding Gentiles to humbly remember the grace received to save them.
- ✓ He is also reminding them to *live out* that grace — to live lives that demonstrate that grace.

2. Consider Israel and Be **ENCOURAGED** (vv. 23-34)

• Israel Can (and **WILL BE**) Grafted Back Into God's Promises (v. 23)

- ✓ There is a corresponding reality to the warning that God could cut off unbelieving Gentiles — He can also **graft in** Israel *if they do not continue in unbelief*.
- ✓ Israel's problem was lack of faith — **unbelief**. But that is not a permanent condition for the nation. Someday the nation will believe — and when that happens, she will be grafted back into the root of the Abrahamic Covenant and receive all that was promised.
 - This idea of cutting off a branch and then grafting it back into the original tree is not what horticulturists do. But don't press the details of the illustration; Paul's point is that God is able to do something that could not be done in any other circumstance.
 - Cf. **Zech. 12:8 – 13:2**. "The destiny of Israel can and will be reversed. Her return to the Lord is not only possible but certain. To be true to His own promise, His chosen people cannot continue forever in unbelief." [MacArthur]
 - Paul emphasizes this in the next phrase — **God is able...** It is not beyond God's ability (or His grace) to redeem unbelieving Israel. This is God's gospel power — theme of Romans (**1:16-17**).
- ✓ The unbelief of Israel is a great tragedy. But that unbelief is not greater than the power of God's grace. God is not helpless against Israel's rebellion. He will do what He promised to Abraham.

• Israel Will **NOT** Be Cut Off (v. 24)

- ✓ Paul uses the grafting illustration one final time — Gentiles **were cut off** from **a wild olive tree** and **grafted into a cultivated olive tree**. That's **contrary to nature** — it's not the way grafting is ordinarily done, but God did it in His "tree" of salvation. And if He could do that, then **how much more** could He do for His covenant people? How much grace awaits them?
- ✓ Paul does not mean that Israel "deserves" God's grace; but He does mean that "they retain the stamp of their origin" [Moo] — they are connected to the "rich root" (v. 17), and as part of the tree of His covenant, He is powerful to reconnect them as a nation to that promise.
- ✓ Individual Israelites have been cut off from the blessings of God, but one day, the nation of Israel will yet receive all the promises God made to them. Of that, we and they can be sure.
- ✓ God has not failed. Israelites have sinned. But Israel will not be cut off; she will be saved.

Lessons Learned:

- ✓ **There is one "tree" of salvation** — that is to believe in God's Messiah to save us from our sin. Salvation is always only by grace through faith — true of Abraham, Israel, and Gentiles (**4:11-12**).
- ✓ **We have no reason for pride in our salvation**. We only deserve one thing: Hell. If we avoid Hell, it is always and only because God has poured out His rich grace on us. Never get over that reality.

- ✓ **Ethnic hatred against Israel is sin.** We are not better than they. We are just as dependent on God's grace as they are. They are not dependent on us; we are dependent on God's promises to them.
- ✓ **God is gracious, but He is also wrathful and willing to exercise His wrath.** Don't ever mistake His "silence" for His reticence to condemn sinners. If you are not a believer and you are living in sin and "avoiding" His condemnation it is only because He is patiently granting you time to repent (**2:4-5**). But that patience will one day end — and because you and I don't know when it will end, today is the best day possible to repent.
- ✓ **There are implications of receiving God's kind salvation.** He doesn't save us so that we can continue in sin. He saves us to liberate us from sin so that we might be His slaves (**6:20-22**). Have we become "casual" about obedience and presumptuous about sin?
- ✓ **Never give up on those who do not yet believe (Jew or Gentile).** God is able to save unrighteous Gentiles and He is able to save unrighteous Jews. No one's sin is so great that it supersedes God's grace and salvation. He saved Abraham, He saved Paul, He saved me. He can save anyone. Do not despair and do not give up praying for and evangelizing those who do not know Christ.

BENEDICTION: **Romans 11:33-36**