

A Study in the Book of Romans

26

Romans 11:1-24

Key Verses

‘ Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! ’

We now enter **Romans 11**, Paul’s final discourse on the hope for Israel found in the Gospel. In **Romans 9-10**, he just has addressed the questions related to Israel’s rejection of the Gospel. Now he looks forward to the time when Israel will embrace the Gospel that already belongs to her.

But before he does, he must first answer a very serious question. It was obvious to all his Romans readers that Israel, by and large, had rejected the Gospel. Did this mean that God has now rejected Israel?

Introduction

The Gospel’s Three Revelations

The Gospel’s Three Answers

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

Did God Reject His People?

Read Romans 11:1-2

To the question whether God had outright rejected his people, Paul is emphatic. “Certainly not,” he says. “For example there’s me!”

Paul himself was an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin! And there were many others like Paul – Jews who had responded in faith to the Gospel. Just take a look at these scriptures:

- **Acts 2:5-41** – “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven...Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”
- **Acts 6:7** – “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”
- **Acts 14:1** – “At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.”
- **Acts 13:42-43** – “When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.”
- **Acts 17:4** – “Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.”
- **Acts 17:11-12** – “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.”
- **Acts 21:20** – “When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: ‘You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.’”

We must remember that the beginning of the Church was exclusively Jewish. The 120 who gathered in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost were all Jews – there was not a single Gentile among them! Of all the people who believed in Christ on the Day of Pentecost – 3000 in total – every single one was a Jew or a Jewish convert. In fact, it is not until we come to **Acts 10** that we find the first Gentile convert to Christ – Cornelius. The next reference to any Gentile believing on the Messiah is found in **Acts 11:19-21**, where we find Jewish disciples beginning to speak of the Lord Jesus to the Gentiles of Antioch.

Far from an outright rejection of Jesus, a large number of Jews *did* embrace Jesus as Messiah. But they were a significant minority. The vast majority rejected him and Paul refers to this majority when he writes in **11:25**: “Israel has experienced a hardening *in part* until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.”

The Remnant

Read Romans 11:3-6

In using himself as an example that God has not rejected His people, Paul is emphasizing the *individuality* of the Gospel. During even the darkest times in Israel’s history, there had always been individuals – the “remnant” – who had truly followed God:

- In Elijah's day there were 7000 (**11:2-4; 1 Kings 19:10-18**).
- Amos saw the Lord sifting Israel as corn is sifted in a sieve until only the true is left (**Amos 9:9-10**).
- Zephaniah, Micah and Jeremiah spoke of the "remnant" being gathered by the Lord (**Zephaniah 3:12-13; Micah 2:12; 5:3; Jeremiah 23:3**).
- Ezekiel declared that salvation is based on a man's individual righteousness (**Ezekiel 14:14,20,22**).

Prophet after prophet revealed that though the nation of Israel had turned against God there was always within the nation a remnant – individuals who never compromised their faith. Relationship with God is an *individual* relationship. A person is not saved because he belongs to a particular nation or is a member of a particular family. Each must surrender his own life to the Lord (note **Ezekiel 18**).

This, says Paul, was the case with the Jews of his day – a remnant had responded to the glorious grace offered in the Gospel (**11:5-6**). God has not rejected those he "foreknew" – the sons he foreloved because of their faith in Christ (**11:2; 8:29**). These individuals, who have opened their hearts to the Gospel, are God's elect, his chosen ones, because they have received his Son. The others, although so earnestly seeking righteousness, have not obtained it because they sought it by their own works and rejected the free grace offered to them in Christ (**11:6-7**).

The Hardening of Unbelieving Jews

Read Romans 11:7-10

In **11:7-10**, Paul combines a series of Old Testament scriptures to describe the condition that has come upon the unbelieving Jew.

Read Deuteronomy 29:4

Read Isaiah 6:9-10

Read Isaiah 29:10

Read Psalm 69:22-23

The picture Paul paints for us is this:

A man has been feasting comfortably at his banquet table, has become dull and drowsy, and so is bent over the table, dozing (**11:9**). There is such a drowsiness upon him that it is like a "spirit of stupor" so that he can't open his eyes. Even the noise around him can't snap him out of it (**11:8**). He feels very safe and secure – and this false sense of security is his Achilles' heel, for he is an open target for an enemy to attack him unawares.

This, says Paul, describes the condition of the Jews of his day. They were so self-satisfied, so secure in their confidence of being God's "chosen people," that this became their very downfall. They had become "hardened."

This is how various Bible versions render **11:7**:

- **New International Version** – “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others *were hardened...*”
- **New King James Version** – “What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest *were blinded...*”
- **New Century Version** – “So this is what has happened: Although the Israelites tried to be right with God, they did not succeed, but the ones God chose did become right with him. The others *were made stubborn and refused to listen to God...*”
- **New Living Translation** – “So this is the situation: Most of the Jews have not found the favor of God they are looking for so earnestly. A few have – the ones God has chosen – but the rest *were made unresponsive...*”
- **The New Testament in Modern English** – “What conclusion do we reach now” That Israel did not, on the whole, obtain the object of his striving, but a chosen few ‘got there,’ while the remainder *become more and more insensitive to the righteousness of God...*”
- **The Message** – “And then what happened? Well, when Israel tried to be right with God on her own, pursuing her own self-interest, she didn’t succeed. The chosen ones of God were those who let God pursue his interest in them, and as a result received his stamp of legitimacy. The ‘self-interest Israel’ *became thick-skinned toward God...*”
- **The Amplified Bible** – “What then [shall we conclude]? Israel failed to obtain what it sought [God’s favor by obedience to law]. Only the elect (those chosen few) obtained it; while the rest of them *became callously indifferent – blinded, hardened and made insensible to it.*”

The word translated “hardened” (NIV) literally means “to be petrified, to be calloused.”¹ To be “calloused” is an expression used to describe the hard skin that occasionally forms over an area of the body, causing loss of sensitivity. Even today we use this term to describe the condition of some people’s hearts. If we say someone is “callous,” we mean he is unfeeling, unsympathetic and indifferent to other people’s pain. It happens if a man deliberately hardens his own heart in situations – after a while he becomes insensitive in those areas. Similarly, we call some men “hardened criminals,” for they have lost all sense of moral feeling in their crime. So, just as a callus can grow on a hand, so it can also, says Paul, grow on the heart. And this is what had happened to many Jews. They had become insensitive to God’s appeal.

Paul then uses another Old Testament quotation to describe their condition. Their “eyes had become darkened” (11:9). In **John 8:12**, the Lord Jesus declared:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Because a large majority of first-century Jews had refused the Light offered to them, this had resulted in them becoming spiritually blind. Paul describes their

condition graphically in **2 Corinthians 3:13-16**:

“We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”

As in **Romans 11:9**, Paul is here describing the condition of Jews outside of Christ. But with this diagnosis also comes the cure! For, as Paul says, “only in Christ is [the veil] taken away.” And then he says, “Whenever anyone” – whether Jew or Gentile – “turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” The heart is softened and the eyes are opened to the glory of the Gospel of Christ.

Did They Stumble Beyond Hope?

Read Romans 11:11-12

The next question that Paul addresses is an obvious one. It is a question that follows easily from Paul’s description in **11:8-10** of the Jewish condition.

“If the heart of the Jews as a whole has become calloused, does that mean that there is now no hope of recovery for them?”

Again, without hesitation, Paul gives a short, quick answer. “Not at all!” Paul now emphasizes the point that, just as Israel’s rejection of the truth is not *total*, so also it is not *final*. They may have stumbled over the “Stone” and fallen, but Paul joyously expresses the hope he sees for them both now and in the future.

The Hope for Israel Now

Paul makes the clear point that the door is continually open for every individual (**11:1-5,11-15**), as he also states in **2 Corinthians 6:2**:

“For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”

The overwhelming response of the Gentiles to the Gospel was not only God’s great plan (**Ephesians 3:4-6**), but was also serving as a tool to reach Israel. God’s strategy in dealing with his “stiff-necked people” (**Acts 7:51**) was two-fold:

- Israel’s rejection was used to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles (**Acts 18:6**).
- The Gentiles’ reception of the Gospel’s blessings was, in turn, being used to make Israel envious in the hope of turning them to Christ.

Even Paul in his ministry expresses this double purpose (**11:13-14**). His great love for the Gentiles was no less (**Philippians 1:3-8; 2 Corinthians 6:11-13**), but at the same time his love for his fellow-Jews was also expressed in his preaching

to the Gentiles “in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.”

Having a Right Attitude Toward the Jews

Read Romans 11:13-15

Prior to this section, Paul has been mostly addressing the Jews. But now he speaks directly to the Gentiles (**11:13**). He wants to make the situation very clear to them. He has been speaking very openly and strongly to the Jews, but he doesn't want this to cause the Gentiles to be lifted up in a false sense of pride and security.

Behind Paul's strong words to the Jews has been his heart's desire to see them acknowledge that Jesus Christ is indeed their Lord and Messiah (**11:13-14**). He then goes on to say:

“But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!”

Paul is seeking to bring balance to the Romans' understanding of God's purposes. God had not rejected his people; instead, they had rejected God's plan. Yet there is hope – and the hope for Israel means even greater blessing for the Gentiles! For if the stumbling of the Jews has been the cause of so much blessing to the Gentiles, imagine what their conversion will mean! If the few who have received Christ have so blessed the world, what will their “fullness”* mean? (**11:12**). If their rejection of the Gospel meant the opening of the way for the world's reconciliation to God (**Ephesians 2:11-22**), their acceptance will mean resurrection life to the world! (**11:15**). It will be so glorious it will be like the birth of a new world – a world where indeed “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (**Habakkuk 2:14**).

Two Illustrations

Read Romans 11:16

To clarify for the Gentiles the importance of the heritage of Israel, Paul uses two pictures. The first he takes from the words of Moses himself.

The firstfruits of the dough

Read Numbers 15:17-21

This offering of the firstfruits of the dough to the Lord, explains Paul, makes the *whole* lump of dough sacred. In this way, Paul's use of the word “firstfruits” is equivalent to his use earlier of the word “remnant.” He is applying the term “fruitfruits” to the remnant of Israel that had believed in Christ. James describes the nature of firstfruits in God's kingdom in **James 1:18**:

“He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

* The “fullness” of the Jews is used in the same sense as the “full number” of Gentiles in **11:25**.

James calls his readers “a kind of firstfruits.” This is the same picture that Paul is painting. The Jews who had believed in the Lord Jesus at the very beginning were a “firstfruits” of the entire nation of Israel, offered to God. And if the firstfruits is holy, so automatically is the whole lump of dough.*

The roots of the tree

Paul goes on with a second picture to emphasize this point: “If the root is holy, so are the branches.” In the case of a natural tree, its branches will only be as healthy as its roots are strong and deep. Whereas in his first illustration, the firstfruits of the dough represented the early Jewish believers, now, in this illustration, the roots of the tree represent the roots of the Jewish nation – the patriarchs. For if the patriarchal root of Israel is holy, this will eventually result in the tree of Israel producing good fruit for God.

The Message sheds this light on Paul’s words:

“Behind and underneath all this there is a holy, God-planted, God-tended root. If the primary root of the tree is holy, there’s bound to be some holy fruit.”

The Allegory of the Olive Tree

Read Romans 11:17-24

Paul goes on to enlarge on this picture of a holy tree with the illustration of an olive tree. In ancient times, in order to keep an olive tree from growing weak and unproductive, old branches were cut off and the shoot of a wild olive was grafted in. This affected both the graft and the tree on which it was grafted. The tree was invigorated by the new graft, and in turn the graft, nourished by the sap of the olive stock, was able to produce such fruit normally impossible for a wild olive.

This, Paul is saying, is a description of the Church. The cultivated olive tree is Israel (**Jeremiah 11:16; Hosea 14:6**). The wild olive is the Gentile world. The graft from the wild olive pictures the Gentile believers who have now become part of the people of God.

Two things are emphasized in this illustration.

The unfruitful branches are cut off

The old branches that were cut away are the unbelieving Jews. The Jews who had accepted the Gospel are the “natural branches,” but those branches that had been barren and “deadwood” were pruned away. Jesus himself had warned of this in **John 15:2,6**:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit...If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

* Paul is not saying that the whole nation of Israel is right now holy. Rather, he is looking forward to the time when “all Israel will be saved” (**11:26**).

Likewise, in **John 15:2,6**, he had given this warning to unbelieving Jews:

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

The new branches are grafted in

The unbelieving Jews had to be broken off in order that the believing Gentiles might be grafted in (**11:19-20**). As a result, believing Gentiles and believing Jews are now together sharing in the nourishing sap from the olive root. All the heritage passed down by the saints of the Old Testament is now the heritage of the believing Gentile too.

Read Galatians 3:8,14,26-29

As far as salvation is concerned, there is now no longer Jew or Gentile in Christ – for we all share the same roots.

A Warning to Gentiles

Read again Romans 11:18-22

Paul now turns around and issues the same warning to his Gentile readers that Jesus issued to his Jewish hearers. “If you do not produce the fruit of the olive tree,” says Paul, “you too are in danger of being cut off!”

It would be easy for Paul’s Gentile readers to become arrogant about their grafting into God’s olive tree. They could easily express a smug superiority toward those Jews who had been cut off. But Paul does not give them time to gloat. As he says later in **11:25**:

“I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited...”

The Jewish nation, he explains, has been the channel of blessing to the Gentiles, not the reverse. As Jesus had said, “...Salvation is from the Jew!” (**John 4:22**), and Paul himself had echoed this thought in his statement, “...the gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: *first for the Jew*, then for the Gentile” (**1:16**).

The fact that believing Gentiles were grafted in in place of unbelieving Jews, explains Paul, is not because they were better than the Jews, but simply because of their faith. Likewise, the Jews had been cut off, not because they were worse than the Gentiles (in fact, they had a lot more going for them), because of their unbelief. The Gentiles were not secure because they were Gentiles any more than the Jews had been secure because they were Jews. The key issue was faith in Christ. “So,” says Paul, “make sure you continue in faith!”

In this warning, Paul is by no means advocating the concept that a believer can repeatedly fall in and out of salvation. The counter-balance to Paul’s dramatic warning here is, of course, his great assurances to the believer in **Romans 8**. He has already established two important facts:

- ☞ Our predestination in Christ (**8:29**)
- ☞ Our security in Christ (**8:38-39**)

But now, in **11:22**, Paul is reminding us of two special attributes of God:

- ☞ His *kindness* – his great love and mercy to those who believe
- ☞ His *sternness* – his righteous judgment upon those who do not believe

These two attributes of God produce, in turn, two attitudes within us, which act as guiding lines to keep us in continual right relationship with the Lord:

- ☞ Joyful gratitude for his *kindness* (**Titus 3:4**)
- ☞ Reverent fear of his *sternness* (**Hebrews 12:28-29**)

The New Testament in Modern English puts Paul's warning in these words:

“The situation does not call for conceit but for a certain wholesome fear. If God removed the natural branches for a good reason, take care that you don't give him the same reason for removing you. You must try to appreciate both the kindness and the strict justice of God. Those who fell experienced his justice, while you are experiencing his kindness, and will continue to do so as long as you do not abuse that kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off from the tree.”

The Future Hope for Israel

Read again Romans 11:23-24

Through the picture of the olive tree comes a shining hope for Israel. Despite the harshness of their current condition, as branches that have been cut off, Paul looks forward to the day when they will be grafted back onto the olive tree. This is the wonderful subject we will be exploring in the next lesson.

¹ *Strong's Greek Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.