

The Goodness and Severity of God

Romans 11:11-24

Someone has said that when we get to heaven, there will be three surprises.

First, we will be surprised that some people are not there that we thought would be there.

Second, we will be surprised that some people are there that we never expected to make it.

Third, our greatest surprise will be that we ourselves are there.

Such is the grace of God that surprises us on every level. As Paul shows us in Romans 11, what seems to be a tragedy (Israel's fall into unbelief) in God's plan comes to a wonderful and unexpected finish.

The downfall of Israel and the salvation of Gentiles is the subject of Romans 9-11. A Gentile or Gentiles refers to all of the other people in the world who aren't Jewish. That includes most of us here today.

Two primary questions are asked and answered in Romans 9-11:

(1) Has the Word of God failed because Israel has failed (see 9:6)?

(2) Is there any hope for the nation Israel, or was her failure fatal and final (see 11:1, 11)?

Paul's answers to these questions are clear and confident. His answer to the first question is this: The Word of God has not failed; rather, God's Word has been fulfilled. The Old Testament clearly reveals that God never intended or promised to save and to bless every physical descendant of Abraham. God chose to bless some and not others. Those who have failed are those whom God has not chosen; the faithful remnant are His chosen ones. It is men who have failed because the gospel was proclaimed to the nation Israel, and they willfully rejected it.

Paul's answer to the second question is this: Israel's hope is still future, and it is just as certain as God's Word is reliable. Since God's promises to Israel are not based upon human merit or works but on sovereign grace, they are unthreatened by Israel's disobedience. Just as no amount of good works could merit God's grace, no amount of sin and rebellion can thwart His grace.

In Romans 11:1-10 Paul makes the point that Israel's rejection is partial, not total. There is a remnant of believing Jews. The rest were hardened in unbelief. In Romans 11:11-24 he makes the point that Israel's rejection is temporary, not permanent. God is using the Jews' present rejection of Christ to spread the gospel among the Gentiles. Then He will use the Gentiles' reception of the gospel to bring the Jews to faith in Christ. The end result will be great blessing on the whole world.

In Romans 11:25-32, which we will study next time, Paul will turn to Israel's future restoration. He will direct our attention to the fulfillment of God's promises to His people, the Jews, as it relates to God's present dealings with the Gentiles. Finally, in Romans 11:33-36, Paul will fall on his knees, praising God for His infinite wisdom as revealed in the outworking of His plan to save both Jews and Gentiles.

Romans 11:11-24

11 I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles.

- 12 Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!
- 13 For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,
- 14 if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them.
- 15 For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?
- 16 For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.
- 17 And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree,
- 18 do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.
- 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in."
- 20 Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear.
- 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.
- 22 Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.
- 23 And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.
- 24 For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

1. The fall of the Jews served God's purpose (Rom. 11:11-15)

Paul states his theme in 11:11a: **"I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not!"** Israel's failure was not fatal. He explains (11:11b), **"But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles."** Verse 12 elaborates on the first half of that statement: by the Jews' fall salvation has come to the Gentiles. Verses 13-14 expand on the second half, **"to provoke them to jealousy."**

A. It brought salvation to the Gentiles. (Rom. 11:12, 15)

It's important to realize that while God started His plan of salvation with the Jewish people, He always intended the gospel to spread to the Gentiles. It is not like God's plan A failed and so now He is working plan B. This was always God's plan.

We see this way back in Genesis 12 when God spoke to Abraham: **"I will bless you ... And you shall be a blessing ... And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."** (Gen. 12:2-3). Isaiah 49:6 tells us that God's Messiah was for both Jews and Gentiles and God's people were to proclaim God's His message to all peoples: **"It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth."**

God used Israel's rejection of Jesus to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. We see this clearly in the New Testament in a number of passages. In Matthew 8:11-12 after Jesus saw the great faith of a Gentile Roman centurion, He spoke these words to the Jews who felt they were so privileged that God would never reject them, **"And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."**

Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 21:43: **"Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."**

The missionaries Paul and Barnabas focused on the Jews first but when they rejected the message they said in Acts 13:46: **"It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles."**

Later, in Acts 18 when Paul is preaching in Corinth, this pattern is followed again: **Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."** (Acts 18:5-6).

In one of the last verses in the Book of Acts, Paul declares to those Jews in Rome who refused to believe: **"Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!"** (Acts 28:28).

God used Israel's rejection to bring riches to the Gentiles and this was part of His plan all along. In Romans 11:12 and Romans 11:15 we see that if God used their failures to get the gospel to the Gentiles, He will use their faithfulness even more: **For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?** (Rom 11:15).

B. The Gentiles salvation should make the Jews jealous for it. (Rom. 11:13-14)

The Gentiles' reception of the gospel will move the Jews to jealousy so that at some point they will respond to the gospel. Motivating people to jealousy seems like a strange way to bring them to faith!

Paul is going back to the thought of Deuteronomy 32:21, which he cited in Romans 10:19. In Deuteronomy, Moses predicted Israel's apostasy through idolatry. He wrote (Deut. 32:21), **"They have provoked Me to jealousy by what is not God; They have moved Me to anger by their foolish idols. But I will provoke them to jealousy by those who are not a nation; I will move them to anger by a foolish nation."** Just as Israel provoked God to jealousy and anger by their idolatry, so God will provoke Israel to repentance and faith when they jealously see the Gentiles whom they despise coming to know God.

Those of us who have raised children probably had a time where you asked an older child, "Would you like to go to the store with me?" She was too busy doing her own thing, so she said, "No, I'll stay here." So you asked your younger child, "Would you like to go with me?" She said, "Yes, Daddy, I'll go!" What happened next? Immediately the older child said, "I'll go, too!" She jealously didn't want her younger sister getting all the attention and perhaps some goodies at the store. Her jealousy motivated her to want what her younger sister had accepted.

That's Paul's thought here in Romans 11. The Jews said "no" to Christ, so the gospel was offered to the Gentiles. Many of them gladly accepted Christ. When the Jews see the Gentiles enjoying the blessings of salvation that were intended at first for them, they

may repent and come to Christ. Paul hopes to “**save some of them**” (11:14) in his day. And as we will see next time from Romans 11:25-26, the widespread salvation of the Jews will only happen towards the climax of God’s plan for history, after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

2. The fall of the Jews should make us humble (Rom. 11:16-24).

Arrogant pride and boasting is the opposite of humility. Twice in this chapter Paul reminds us of the importance of not boasting or being arrogant (Ro 11:18, “**do not boast against the branches...**” and Ro 11:20, “**...Do not be haughty, but fear.**”). Paul wants believers to be humble and grateful for their salvation, not to think they are better than others because God has saved them.

It is always a temptation to forget that God’s blessings in our lives are by His grace through faith and not of works. Paul reminds us in verse 19, “**you stand by faith.**” Because we have salvation by God’s grace through faith, we must not become boastful and arrogant, thinking somehow we deserve or have earned our standing with God.

Paul uses two illustrations to drive home this point.

- **Piece of dough.** Look at verse 16: “**For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy...**” A Jewish person would understand this very well. Paul is referring to the offerings and sacrifices in the tabernacle and the practice of setting aside the first of your increase to God. From the firstfruits, a pile of dough was made up and it would be presented to God. This first portion of the harvest was regarded both as an offering and as a promise that the whole harvest belonged to God.

This is carried on today when we give our tithes and offerings to the Lord – we’re giving a portion in acknowledgment that it all belongs to Him. Proverbs 3:9,10: “**Honor the Lord with your possessions, And with the firstfruits of all your increase; So your barns will be filled with plenty, And your vats will overflow with new wine.**”

Paul is arguing that if this chunk of dough was accepted as holy before God, the rest of the harvest would be as well. Abraham is the firstfruit and was accepted -- therefore his offspring will be also.

- **Grafted branches.** Olive trees were very important to the economy of the Israelites. They can live for hundreds of years and it was common for some branches to stop producing fruit. When this would happen, branches from younger trees would be grafted in. Normally, a really good branch was grafted into a stump that wasn’t producing so much; often it was a branch from a cultivated olive tree that was grafted into a wild tree.

But let me point out that this second illustration that Paul uses, according to verse 24, is “**contrary to nature.**” In this metaphor, God flips it in Rom. 11:17: “**And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree**”

What God has done here is unnatural. Rather than grafting good branches into a worthless stock, He has grafted worthless branches into a good stock. In this picture, the branches that have been broken off are ethnic Jews who are not believers in Jesus and the wild olive shoots are the Gentiles who have been grafted in to God’s goodness. Notice that only “**some of the branches**” are broken off – the remnant of true believers is not cut off.

Some have objected to the possibility of grafting a wild olive branch onto a cultivated olive tree. But it is done on occasion and as a result two things happen. First, the wild branch often begins to produce good olives. And second, the old tree is reinvigorated.

Time and again in the Old Testament Israel was referred to as an olive tree. Here's just one example from Jeremiah 11:16 where the Lord prophesies that their branches would be broken off: **"The Lord called your name, Green Olive Tree, Lovely and of Good Fruit. With the noise of a great tumult He has kindled fire on it, And its branches are broken."**

Because we Gentiles have been grafted in, verse 18 calls us to not boast over our position. Paul wrote this to those who might think that because they replaced a branch that was broken off, that they're better than them. *"If I'm not the root, at least I can say that I'm a better branch than the one that was broken off."* Not so. We are to be very careful not to think this way.

We must not look down upon or despise those who are still lost and unbelieving. We must not think we are any better than they. It is only by God's grace that we were grafted in. Those branches which were broken off were removed because of their unbelief. Those branches which were grafted in were added in because of their faith. And faith is nothing to boast about, it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9).

In Romans 11:20 Paul admonishes us to not be haughty or arrogant and Romans 11:21-22 tells us why: **"For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off."**

God is a God of both goodness and severity. The greatest place to behold the kindness and severity of God is at the cross. There the severity of His righteous judgment did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). There the kindness of His tender love forgave all our sins and adopted us as His beloved children the instant we believed in Christ.

All who come with humility and brokenness will find God to be kind and loving, open-armed and ready to save. But if you come arrogantly justifying your actions and attitudes, you will find God to be stern and as merciless as fire.

So he warns us, **"Otherwise you also will be cut off."** The same God who broke off the unbelieving Jews can punish proud churches today. While we know the Bible teaches that an individual cannot lose their salvation, it does teach that a church can lose its effectiveness and outreach. All you need to do is read about the 7 churches in Revelation to see what happens when holiness is replaced with haughtiness. Jesus can remove the lampstand of a church, its light can go out.

Guard yourself against any form of spiritual pride by remembering that salvation is by grace alone. Remember it is by faith you stand. Nothing you did could save you and nothing you do can keep you saved. God must do it by grace.

3. God is still saving Jews and Gentiles who believe (Romans 11:22-24)

The good news is that God is not done yet. He is not done with the Jew...or with you. We see this in Ro 11:23-24: **"And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?"**

This passage will lead us right into the passage for next week about Israel's future hope. God is not finished yet. He is able graft back in those who will believe. God will save through Jesus Christ all who believe, Jew or Gentile.

Israel is not a hopeless case. The fall of the Jews is not total nor is it permanent. And this gives us hope as well. Many of us have lost family members and friends who had the benefit of a Christian upbringing but for some reason they have turned away in unbelief. Theirs is not a hopeless case any more than are the Jews. God can break through the hardness of their hearts. He can open their blind eyes. He can draw them to Himself. They can call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.

Listen, God intends to save some who today are in rebellion against Him. God intends to save some who at this moment deny His existence. God intends to save some who today are in bondage to immorality. God intends to save some who right now refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

So don't give up praying for them. Don't give up living a holy and loving life before them. Don't give up telling the message that Jesus saves. Like Israel, their rejection of Christ may not be total or permanent. They may still believe and be saved.