

“Jesus for Jews”  
Romans 11  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

In this chapter Paul gives us a glimpse into the future.  
What a future it is!

But when we remember that God made his promises to Abraham 4000 years ago and Christianity has been around for 2000 years; When we look around and see 2/3s of the world following other religions and philosophies of life; When we see secularism and non-Christian spiritualities pushing Christianity to the side in our own country; We can easily become very pessimistic and discouraged about the future.  
We can begin to doubt all the Christian talk about Christ as victor over sin and death.  
It sure doesn't look like God is saving the world!

Even more specifically, we Christians know that our Christianity is tied inextricably to the Jews.  
Jesus was a Jew, the early disciples were all Jews, the church was born in the synagogues of the Jews and Christianity itself is rooted in the teachings of the Jewish Scriptures – the Old Testament.  
More than two-thirds of the Bible (Genesis through the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) is written in a Jewish context.

2000 years earlier than when Paul lived, when God called Abraham, God said Abraham and his descendants would be blessed forever. But even as early as Paul's day, the question arose, “What about the Jews?” It looks like the Jews are a lost cause! Did God's promises fail?

It was natural for the Christians in Paul's day and even us today, to ask, “How about it, did God's promises to the Jews not mean much, and what about his promises in the NT, that Jesus would be the savior of the world, do they not mean much either?”

In Romans 9-11 Paul responds to that kind of thinking.

He does so by pointing out in Romans 9 and 10 that God did not fail the Jews – those whom God chose to save he did save. Now here in Romans 11 Paul is going to reiterate that BUT he is also going to describe a future that ought to blow away our pessimism and make us realize that while we are tempted to get impatient and discouraged with the timing of God's actions, we can truly trust him to do the great things for this world, that he has promised.

That is why I said earlier that here in Romans 11 God gives us a glimpse of the future and what a future it is! But he does this by answering the specific question of the future of the Jews. If God can be shown to be faithful to his 4000-year-old promises, I guess I can trust him to be faithful to me.

So what about the Jews?  
100 years ago a British journalist penned the doggerel:  
“How odd of God  
to choose the Jews.”

I don't know its original intent, but that statement is not necessarily anti-Semitic. From a world-perspective, it **is** rather strange that the Jews would hold such a central place in history.

As a humorous aside, Leo Rosten, a Yiddishist of our own era, wrote a response to the so-called “oddness” that God should choose the Jews.

Remember that the word “goyim” in Yiddish means non-Jews. So Rosten wrote his own doggerel:  
How odd of God to choose the Jews?  
Not odd of God. Goyim annoy'im.

Source of doggerels above: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/14176>

But it is, in a way, odd that God should choose the Jews. When you think of one billion Chinese, and billion Indians, and millions of Arab, Germanic and Hispanic peoples of the world, why did God choose such a relatively small people group to be the focus of his plan for the world?

God himself answers that question in Deuteronomy 7:7-8 “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. <sup>8</sup> But it was because the LORD loved you...”

For reasons, not in the Jews, but for reasons in God alone, God chose to set his special affection on them. And even to this day, the Jewish people somehow still stand at the center of world attention.

Israel is constantly in the news.

On Wednesday of this past week, I heard a State Department official speaking of how the Israel/Arab conflict is at the heart of the issues in the Middle East, including Iraq and even Afghanistan and Iran.

About 100 years ago, Frederick the Great of Prussia was having a discussion with his chaplain and saying how skeptical he was of Christianity.

“If the Bible is true, it ought to be capable of very easy proof. What is the proof of the inspiration of the Bible.

The chaplain said that he could in fact, in one word, give the proof that the King desired.

The king was amazed and said what magic word can bear such weight of proof?

The chaplain said, “Israel!”

Boice, Romans, 1375

What other people have for 4000 years been so despised and persecuted and yet don't go away?

So, what is God doing?

Paul begins by asking the question about the Jews that is understandably on the minds of his readers:

Romans 11:1-2

“I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means...<sup>2</sup> God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.”

To show that he is correct in saying that God has not rejected the Jews and thus is a promise-keeping God, Paul begins by citing two kinds of evidence:

First of all, Paul says he is a Jew, a descendant of the very family that some suggest God has rejected.

And clearly God has not rejected him and thus, he is example #1 that God has not rejected all Jews.

But Paul moves quickly to another point and one that helps us understand that God has been acting in spite of appearances.

Paul reminds us that 1000 years earlier Elijah was pessimistic for the same reasons as we might be.

It appeared that evil had won and that God's people were so few in number as to be insignificant and powerless.

So Elijah cried out in 1 Kings 19:10 quoted here in Romans 11:3 "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"?

Romans 11:4-5 "And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." <sup>5</sup> So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace."

Elijah had to be told that all is not as it appears.

God is at work, moving salvation history along just as he planned.

Likewise, while it appears that all Jews are unresponsive to the Gospel; that is not true.

God was even then saving those whom he had chosen.

And while it was not a flood, there was in fact a trickle of Jews who were trusting Jesus.

Paul then reiterates what he had been saying throughout chapters 9 and 10.

God's choice of the Jews he would save was not based on their works but on his gracious will.

And so Paul makes the same distinction here between Israel as a whole and certain Israelites, as part of the elect, that he makes in Romans 9:6 "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."

So here in 11:7 Paul again says there are two kinds of Israelites:

There are descendants of Israel/Jacob who are part of the “elect” and there are descendants of Israel/Jacob who are “hardened.”

We like the idea of God choosing to show mercy on some people but we don't like the idea of God “hardening” others.

And yet Paul quotes from Deuteronomy and Isaiah (Dt 29:4; Isa 29:10) to show, just as he did in Romans 9, that God was somehow involved in the hardening of those who don't trust him.

Back in chapter 9 he said in essence don't accuse God, trust him.

And remember that any suggestion that God is unjust in hardening some must be offset by knowing that if you ask any unbeliever if he wants God to soften his heart and open his eyes the truth of the Gospel. He will tell you “no!”

For you who believe in “free will,” do you really want God to force himself on those who don't want him?

I don't intend to settle the issue of reprobation here but simply to note that Paul and the other NT writers seem to hold God's action of hardening and a person's action of unbelief in balance without fully resolving, what to us appear to be contradictions.

But that is not Paul's major point here in Romans 11.

Here is trying to help us understand what God is up to with the Jews.

And so in verses 11-22 Paul gives an explanation and a warning.

The explanation is that God is actually using the Jews' unbelief to accomplish his larger gracious purposes.

Romans 11:11b “because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles...”

That seems to be a common theme in the Bible – God, in his grace, uses even what is evil for good.

Christianity didn't remain a parochial religion of the Jews, but when the Jews largely rejected it, the Gospel was spread to the Gentiles.

God had told Abraham that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed.

So even when Israel refused to be that means of grace to the world in a positive way, God used even that to carry out his purposes to bless the whole world.

But God was not only going to bless the world through the unbelief of the Jews, God was also going to use the belief of the Gentiles to persuade the Jews to trust Jesus.

Romans 11:11b “because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles **to make Israel envious.** “

He says something similar in verse 14 “in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. He said the same thing back in 10:19 “I will make you (unbelieving Jews) envious by those (believing Gentiles) who are not a nation...”

Kent Hughes tells the story of Dr. Charles Feinberg (obviously Jewish) was for many years a professor at Talbot Seminary, a part of BIOLA University.

When he was a young man, Feinberg lived for a while in an Orthodox Jewish home.

The family with whom he lived had hired what they called a “Sabbath Gentile” who would serve the family on the Sabbath when they were not supposed to work.

The “Gentile” woman was a Christian and she had taken the job specifically to bear witness of Jesus’ love.

Feinberg was so attracted by her life that he asked questions.

She took him to a friend who led him to Christ.

Feinberg was made “jealous” of what she possessed. (Hughes, Romans, 197)

I honestly don’t know how God is going to do that on a large scale in the future, but understanding it on the scale of one-to-one, we are shown what it means when Jesus says in Matthew 5:16, “let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

I don’t know how God is going to use Israel’s jealousy of the Gentiles’ belief to bring more Jews to Jesus, but here I see that he is going to do so and it will not be just a few Jews.

Paul says in essence, in verse 12, if Israel’s sin of unbelief has brought the riches of the Gospel to the Gentiles, imagine what will be the outcome for the world when many Jews are saved.

And in verse 15 he repeats his expectation that if the Jews rejection of Jesus brought salvation for the rest of the world then imagine what their acceptance of Jesus will mean.

Paul clearly posits a future that is far different than what we see now.

Now, as I said earlier, Paul's explanation of what God is doing now with the Jews also comes with a warning.

Paul's whole metaphor of an olive tree's root and branches, in verses 16-22, is meant to warn Gentiles.

It is very tempting to Gentile Christians to write off the Jews as a lost cause.

Even worse, as we have seen through the ages, is the idea that the Jews are somehow the enemies of God.

Anti-Semitism was not reserved to the Russians or the Nazis.

It is alive and well, even today, and even among Christians.

One Jewish writer captured it well when, picking up on the earlier doggerel I mentioned, wrote,

How odd of God

To choose the Jews.

But not so odd

As those who choose

The Jewish God

And hate the Jews.

Cecil Browne

Christians must not think the church is theirs in some way exclusive of the Jews.

To use Paul's metaphor, there is only one olive tree, one way for being rightly related to God – that is by grace.

In the OT Judaism was God's means of bringing his salvation to the world.

A right relationship with God in the OT for Jew or Gentile was only by God's grace through the law and sacrifices of Israel (which pointed forward to the Messiah).

That means a Gentile in the OT had to become a convert to true Judaism to be part of the people of God.

In the NT the church, through the Messiah Jesus, is God's means of bringing salvation to the world.

A right relationship with God in the NT for Jew or Gentile is only by God's grace through the fulfilled law and sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah.

That means to be part of the people of God today, anyone, Jew or Gentile, must become a convert to Christ, a part of the body of Christ, the church.

Whether Jew or Gentile, whether OT or NT, we only have a relationship with God by God's grace through faith in God's revealed provision.

Jew or Gentile we are recipients of unmerited favor.

No superiority here!

Furthermore the warning is not only to not act superior to the Jews, but to also remember that if we don't persevere in faith, we too can be cut off.

In verse 22 Paul writes, "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off."

Those who believe in what they call "eternal security" don't like this verse and attempt to explain it away.

But here Paul gives no comfort to the idea that a carnal Christian is a "saved and safe" condition, even if it is unsatisfying.

Very difficult for me are funerals where a loving relative says, "I know that Johnny didn't give any evidence of being a Christian but when he was 5 he asked Jesus into his heart, so I know he's in heaven."

That is not the teaching of the Bible or of this passage.

The Bible is consistent in teaching that those who trust in Christ do persevere in trust and obedience otherwise it is clear they never truly turned to Christ.

I believe Paul is warning against the assumption that just because you are not a Jew and you are a part of the church, that you are somehow okay.

Don't make the same mistake the Jews made.

Verse 24 says it won't be harder for Jews to become Christ-followers, but actually easier.

Exactly how it is easier, is not explained.

The point I think is simply that we shouldn't assume that the Jews are counted out, but to the contrary, understand that God will do something with the Jews in the future that is very different from what we see now.

All Israel will be saved!

OT prophecies

The church is not the new Israel in every aspect.

When will this take place?

This story of redemption is not over.

What we see now is not all there will be.

The great turning to Christ in the end.

January 20, 2008