

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 15, 2017**

A FUTURE AND A HOPE?

Romans 11:1-16

As we resume our “Journey on the Romans Road” this morning, I invite you to turn in your Bible to Romans 11:1-16. May we give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

* * * * *

Romans 11 is not easy to understand or explain. Not every detail of God’s plan for the Jewish people is as clear as we might want it to be. That’s an understatement. In Romans 9, 10 and 11, we really do find ourselves in some of the deepest theological water to be found anywhere in the Bible. Even if we are not able to plumb the deepest depths of this portion of Paul’s letter to the Romans, there is still much truth here in Romans 11 that we *can* grasp – truth that God can use to shape our lives and our understanding of His plan of salvation for His covenant people Israel (the Jewish people) and non-Jews alike. So, what I want to do today is to take a walk through the first part of Romans 11 to see what God has to say to us – what God has to teach us – here. Let’s go for a walk together.

We have already seen in Romans 9 and 10 how deeply Paul loves the Jewish people – his own people – and his heartfelt concern for their salvation. Remember what he said at the beginning of chapter 9: “I speak the truth in Christ ... I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel” (9:1-4a). And again, at the beginning of chapter 10: “Brothers (and sisters), my heart’s desire and prayer for the Israelites is that they may be saved” (10:1).

You can both hear and feel the emotion, the heartache in Paul’s words, can’t you? He is disturbed in his spirit by the fact that so many of the Jews – a great majority of them in his own day – have rejected the message of the gospel. They have rejected Jesus, the Messiah sent from God, God-with-us, the Savior of sinners, the Prince of peace, the Lord of all. It grieves Paul’s heart that Israel, the nation God chose to be His own people, has largely turned away from God in unbelief and disobedience.

Their rejection of Jesus and His saving work prompts Paul to ask, in Romans 11:1, if God has in fact rejected His people. Does Israel’s rejection of Jesus, its rejection of God’s way of salvation by grace through faith, mean that God has rejected Israel? “*Me genoito!*” says Paul (11:1). It is an expression Paul uses ten times in Romans (twice here in Romans 11; see 11:11), each time in response to a question Paul himself has posed. It is usually translated: “By no means!” or “Not at all!” or “God forbid!” In today’s vernacular we might say: “No way, Jose!”

Paul unequivocally rejects the suggestion that God has rejected His chosen people. Despite their rejection of Him, God is not through with Israel. To support his conviction, Paul offers the following. It is as if he is presenting evidence in a courtroom.

Exhibit 1 is Paul himself. Look at verse 1. He says: “I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.” Paul presents his credentials as a member of the chosen people to show that God has not rejected Israel as a whole. This is not the only time in the New Testament in which Paul appeals to his Jewish *bona fides*. Upon his arrest in Jerusalem, in making his defense in Acts 22 before the lynch mob that thought he deserved death, Paul says: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up (here in Jerusalem). Under Gamaliel” – one of the most famous rabbis – “I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of (Jesus) to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison” (22:3-4).

In addition, in his letter to the Philippians (the church in Philippi), Paul writes: “If anyone else thinks he [or she] has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:5-6). Paul then goes on to say: “But whatever was to my profit” – regarding his Jewish ancestry and his devout adherence to the Jewish law and traditions – “I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:7-8).

Paul’s Jewishness was established beyond a shadow of a doubt. What God did in his life, changing his heart, making him a new creature in Christ, transforming him from a blasphemer and persecutor of the church into a missionary of the gospel, lavishing His mercy and grace upon Paul in salvation, was irrefutable evidence that God had not – *has not* – rejected Israel as a whole.

Paul’s Exhibit 2 is more theological than personal, though it should be said that what is theological has personal implications. Not just for Paul, but for all of us. Theology affects life. Whether you realize it or not, *your* theology affects *your* life. Paul’s appeal to theology is in verse 2, where he says: “God did not reject His people, whom He foreknew.” God’s foreknowledge, as we saw in Romans 8:29, is intertwined with and inseparable from His predestination or electing grace. Listen to 8:29: “For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.” To “predestine” is to choose or determine beforehand.

What Paul is saying in 11:2 is that God will never reject those whom He knew and chose beforehand – even before the beginning of time – to be His very own people. What is also clear from this is what Paul has said earlier, in Romans 9:6, that not all who are Israelites by ancestry are Israelites spiritually (*MSG*). Just because you have Jewish ancestors doesn’t automatically mean you have been elected to salvation in Christ. But those whom God knew and chose ahead of time in His electing grace will never be forsaken by God. You can count on it. Because you can count on God.

Exhibit 3 is a biblical example, as Paul appeals to the experience of Elijah, one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history. Following his dramatic victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), Elijah feared for his life. Fearing the wrath of Israel's evil King Ahab and his even more evil wife Jezebel, Elijah ran for his life and became depressed to the point of despair, thinking he was the only true believer, the only true follower of the Lord left in Israel, and that he was going to end up just like all the other prophets – dead. But the Lord told Elijah he was not alone, that there was a remnant of 7,000 others who remained faithful to God. God has not and will not ever leave Himself without a witness – without witnesses, plural – in the world. And, though the wrong seems oft so strong, not only is God the Ruler yet, but the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever. Amen? Amen!

Just as there had been a faithful remnant of believing Jews in Elijah's day, there was also a faithful remnant of Jewish believers in Paul's day, which is Paul's Exhibit 4. "At the present time," says Paul in verse 5, "there is a remnant chosen by grace." And in our day, too. It is a remnant that includes Pastor David and Elder Rick Belzer and some other people you probably know of Jewish heritage, too. Now, as then, this remnant is chosen by grace. It is all by grace and only by grace. They are saved by grace through faith, which is the only way for any of us to be saved. Good deeds have nothing to do with it, because you can never do enough good or be good enough to earn the blessings of God's favor.

The existence of a faithful remnant of Jewish believers in Elijah's time, in Paul's time, and in our time, is enduring evidence that God has not completely rejected the Jewish people.

It is true, as Paul says in verses 7-10, that not all who were part of physical or ethnic Israel obtained God's favor. But the elect, those chosen by God for salvation – did. In the case of those who rejected God, who turned away from Him and refused to follow His ways, their hearts became progressively hardened. Because of their unbelief, God caused spiritual blindness and deafness to set in. Though they had eyes, they could not see. Though they had ears, they could not hear (11:8; cf. Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 29:10). This is just as true of non-Jews as it is of Jewish unbelievers. It is not a pretty picture, and I pray that it does not describe anyone here today. The unpleasant truth is that those who are blind or deaf to the gospel of God's grace, those whose hearts become hardened to the message of Jesus and His saving love, are responsible and will be held accountable for their blindness and deafness, and the hardness of their hearts. But it is *not* too late to ask God to perform in your life the same kind of miracle He performed in Paul's. Don't wait until it *is* too late.

In verse 11, Paul poses another question,, related but not identical to the question in verse 1. The question in verse 1 has to do with whether God's rejection of His people is total, the answer to which is: "*Me genoito!*" Absolutely not! May it never be so! Those who refused to believe God, who rejected the gospel, have undergone a hardening of their hearts. But a believing remnant remains.

The question in verse 11 is whether the unbelief of the Jews and their consequent hardening is permanent or temporary. It is a question of hope: Is there any hope for Israel? Or is God finished with them? You can see that it is a serious question.

“Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? *Me genoito!*” No way! Just as Israel’s hardening is not total, their stumbling – their turning away from God and His grace – is not final. It is not the last word.

In verses 11-16, Paul seems to be saying that there are (or will be) three successive phases in the outworking of God’s plan of redemption for the world through Christ. The first phase is that through Israel’s rejection of the gospel, through the unbelief of so many of the Jews, the message of salvation has come to the Gentile world – of which we non-Jews are the beneficiaries. Following the resurrection of Jesus, the giving of the Great Commission, and the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came in power upon the church in Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus began to proclaim the gospel boldly to their fellow Jews. In its early years, the church was primarily if not exclusively made up of Jews. In the Book of Acts, as the gospel spread, especially through the missionary journeys of Paul, they preached the gospel first in the synagogues of the cities and towns to which they traveled. It was only when the Jews in a particular place rejected the good news of Jesus that Paul and others began to witness and preach to Gentiles.

So, you see, it was Israel’s rejection of the gospel message that opened the door for the Gentiles to receive it and, through faith in Jesus, to enter the kingdom of God. God used the unbelief of Israel to bless the Gentile world with the gospel. As a result, the church became increasingly and predominantly Gentile in make-up. That was phase 1.

In phase 2, the salvation of Gentiles will make the people of Israel envious of the blessings the Gentiles have received through Christ, and will lead many Jews to saving faith. This is what Paul says in verses 11 and 12. He admits that his goal is in part to arouse envy in his fellow Jews in order to save some of them (11:14). Paul doesn’t mean that he has the power to save anyone. Only Jesus does. But Paul desires to be the human instrument, or one of the human instruments, used by God to bring unbelievers, Jewish or not, to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This should be our desire, too. Shouldn’t it? Don’t you want God to use you to rescue lost souls? To bring sinners to the Savior? Isn’t this a huge part of God’s vision for our church in our community in this time? And for your life and mine as followers of Jesus?

While phase 1 has already taken place, on a large scale phase 2 is still to come. Certainly it has happened and continues to happen on a small scale, as particular Jews come to see the blessings of the gospel in the lives of Gentile believers and accept the gospel. But it has not yet happened on a large, worldwide scale. It is yet to come.

Phase 3 will take place when, as a result of the great spiritual harvest of Jewish believers in Christ, this “fullness” (11:12) of Jewish believers will lead to greater spiritual riches – an unprecedented spiritual harvest of Gentile believers, to the glory and praise of God. And it will hasten in the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

There is more for us to explore in Romans 11. And, God willing, we will do so next Sunday. But I don't want to finish today without pondering again the place of the Jewish people in God's plan. And, in particular, the question: Is God finished with the Jews? Or does God still have a place in His plan for the Jews?

I think what the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah to the defeated people of Judah in exile in Babylon is relevant to this question. Jeremiah 29 contains the text of a letter written by the prophet to the people in exile, to reassure them that though they have been forcibly moved far from home, God has not abandoned them. God has not rejected them. God has not forgotten them. He gives them a promise that after 70 years in exile, He will bring His people back to their homeland. Though they are now suffering the consequences of their sins, God is not finished with them yet. He still has a plan and purpose for them.

This is the assurance the Lord gives them in Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope."

In the darkest hours of defeat and exile, the Lord says to His people: "I will bless you. I will prosper you with my grace." The word translated "prosper" in the NIV is the Hebrew word *shalom*, which means peace and well-being in the fullest, widest sense imaginable.

This assurance of God's blessing, then or now, is not due to anything the people of Israel or you or I have done or could ever do to make ourselves deserving of it. It is not because they or we have earned it or are able to earn it, for we are not. It is all because God is gracious and loving and kind.

That any of us are included in His saving purposes is all due to His grace and love and kindness to us. It is all part of His plan, a plan that includes Jews and Gentiles alike. God is not finished with the Jews, any more than He is finished with you or me. And we know that He is not finished with us. For we know, as the Bible says in Philippians 1:6, that God, who has begun a good work in us, will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus our Lord. We have His word on it.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.