

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 22, 2017**

**A FUTURE AND A HOPE? (2)**

**Romans 11:17-32**

Last Sunday we began a walk through Romans 11, and we made it as far as verse 16. I want to retrace some of our steps from last Sunday, and then pick up where we left off and continue our stroll today. It is really more of a hike than a leisurely stroll in the park, since the rugged theological terrain of Romans 11 requires strenuous effort and spiritual discernment in order to traverse it with proper understanding. Challenging as it may be, I invite you to turn in your Bible to Romans 11, as we look together at verses 17-32. Let us give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Previously, in the first leg of our walk through Romans 11, we took note of the four exhibits Paul introduced into evidence in support of his belief that, despite Israel's rejection of God, as seen in their rejection of Jesus as their promised Messiah and Savior, God has not rejected them. Though they have rejected Him, God has not rejected His chosen people.

As Exhibit 1, Paul presents himself and his credentials as a Jew, and God's mercy and grace to him, as evidence that God has not rejected Israel as a whole (11:1).

Exhibit 2 is Paul's declaration in verse 2 that God has not rejected His people, whom He foreknew. Chosen-ness (or election) and foreknowledge are all wrapped up together in a way that they cannot be separated. And God will never "un-choose" those He has chosen to be His very own people.

Exhibit 3 comes from the life and times of Elijah the prophet who thought he was the only follower of the Lord left in Israel, only to learn that God had kept a remnant of 7,000 others who, like Elijah, were faithfully following God (11:2b-10). Many in Israel had fallen away, but God had preserved a remnant, a faithful minority, who continued to trust and obey God. Once again, we see that God has not completely rejected His people.

Exhibit 4 is the presence of a faithful remnant of Jewish believers in Christ in Paul's day (the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.). In verse 5, he says: "So too, at the present time" – right now – "there is a remnant chosen by grace." And, as we said last Sunday, there is a faithful remnant of Jewish believers in Christ up to this very moment.

God has not fully or finally rejected the Jewish people. Nor will He ever despite the fact that for 2,000 years, the Jewish people have largely, mostly, overwhelmingly rejected the Son of God who became a man and came to live among us in order to save us from our sins and make us right with God through His redemptive death on the cross for us.

Do you see how strong Paul's case is that God has not given up on His people?

Then, in verses 11-16, we took note of three successive stages in God’s plan of salvation, as it is being worked out in this period of history after the incarnation, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, after the giving of the Great Commission, and, following the ascension of Jesus into heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon His followers at Pentecost. Stage 1 was the unbelief of the Jews (their rejection of the gospel) that opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles, many of whom received it eagerly and became followers of Jesus. Through the unbelief of the Jews, the Gentiles were blessed (11:11).

Stage 2 takes place when the spiritual blessings the Gentiles have received through Christ make the Jews envious, leading many Jews to saving faith in Christ (11:11-14). Listen to what E. F. Harrison says about this: “The purpose of Gentile influx into the church is not merely to magnify the grace of God toward outsiders” (which it does), “but to evoke envy on the part of Israel as a factor leading to her ultimate return to God as a people” (Harrison, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans* 111-120).

This begs the question: Has this taken place? Have we made the Jewish people envious by the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, or by the quality of our lives and love that can only be explained by the saving and transforming grace of Jesus? Here and there, I’m sure, it has happened in individual cases. But our witness – and the witness of the Christian church at large – has not yet led to any large-scale conversion of unbelieving Jews. We have to ask ourselves: Is it because there is little in our lives that our unbelieving Jewish neighbors would envy? Or is it because our light is not shining in ways or places where it can be seen by Jewish people? It is something to think about.

Stage 3, still yet to come, is a tremendous spiritual harvest of Jewish believers in Christ, unlike anything the world has ever seen, which, if I read Romans 11 correctly, will reach its zenith at the time when the Lord Jesus comes again (11:26).

We will return to Paul’s prophecy concerning Israel’s future in a little bit. First, though, let’s look at what he has to say in verses 17-24.

### **THE OLIVE TREE ALLEGORY**

I am not a horticulturist. Nor have I ever played one on TV. A horticulturist, in case you don’t know, is an expert in the science and art of growing fruits, vegetables, flowers and ornamental plants. Likewise, an arborist is a specialist in the cultivation and care of trees and shrubs. The apostle Paul was neither a horticulturist nor an arborist. At least not by profession. But he uses a horticultural example here in verses 17-24 to explain the relationship between Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) believers, and between believers (whether Jew or Gentile) and God. It is the analogy (or allegory) of the olive tree. It is really about two olive trees. Or, at least, about branches from two different olive trees, one wild and one cultivated.

Olive trees were – and are – very common in Israel. There is a reason the “Mount of Olives” is called the “Mount of Olives”! The cultivated olive tree stands for Israel, God’s chosen nation, whose roots are the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, along with other leaders

such as Moses and David), and whose stem represents the covenant people of Israel down through the centuries. The wild olive tree represents the Gentile world. A wild olive tree, unlike a cultivated tree, generally produces small, hard olives with little or no oil in them.

The branches that are broken off (11:17) from the good tree are unbelieving Jews who have refused to accept the gospel message. They are displaced in favor of wild olive shoots that are grafted in. These wild olive shoots, Paul says, represent Gentile believers who now share in the blessings of God's grace. Amazingly, both the stem and the graft are affected positively by this horticultural surgery. The grafted-in branches produce good fruit and the stem of the tree is reinvigorated at the same time.

This is Paul's way of showing how God's mercy, grace, and unfailing love extend to both Jewish and Gentile believers alike. Not one or the other, but both. But what about the Jews who, because of unbelief, have been broken off and temporarily discarded from the tree? The good news is that, in the same way that God grafted in believing Gentiles (the wild shoots), He can graft in again the natural branches when their unbelief is replaced by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If someone were to suggest that this all sounds pretty miraculous, it is! But God, you see, is in the miracle business. He is able, more than able, to do immeasurably more than you and I could ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). Amen?

The promise that Jewish unbelievers who come to faith in Christ can and will be restored to the olive tree representing God's redeemed people is one of the lessons to take away from this allegory (11:23-24). God has not given up on them.

A second lesson is found in the warning Paul gives to Gentile believers (like most of us) not to crow over the branches that have been removed to make room for us. We must never take our privileged position for granted, and think that we're so much better than the branches that were broken off due to their unbelief. Because we aren't any better. So Paul warns us not to be arrogant and think ourselves better or more deserving than we are (11:20). As it says in *The Message* paraphrase, "The only reason (we)'re on the tree is because (our) graft 'took' when (we) believed, and because (we)'re connected to that belief-nurturing root. So don't get cocky and strut your branch. Be humbly mindful of the root that keeps you lithe and green. If God didn't think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches, why would He hesitate over (any of us)? He wouldn't give it a second thought.... And don't get to feeling superior to those pruned branches down on the ground. If they don't persist in remaining deadwood, they could well get grafted back in. God can do that. He can perform miracle grafts. Why, if He could graft *you* – branches cut from a tree out in the wild – into an orchard tree, He certainly isn't going to have any trouble grafting branches back into the tree they grew from in the first place. Just be glad you're in the tree, and hope for the best for the others" (11:19-21, 23-24, *MSG*).

Humility and gratefulness of heart are always called for. *Always*.

In verse 22, Paul urges us to “consider ... the kindness and sternness” (or severity) “of God: sternness to those who fell” through unbelief, “but kindness to you, as long as you continue in His kindness.” You see, perseverance in the obedience of faith and in fruit-bearing is the test of whether or not your profession of faith is the real deal. If your faith is genuine, you need never doubt the lovingkindness of the Lord to you. But those who refuse to believe, or only pretend to believe, will encounter the severity of God’s righteous and holy judgment. That is a warning to take seriously.

### **THE MYSTERY OF GOD’S PLAN**

Now, in verse 25, we return to the subject of Israel’s future, which Paul describes as a “mystery” (11:25). As Paul uses it, the word “mystery” does not mean an enigma or a secret known only by a select group of people who have special knowledge. It refers to the divinely-ordained purpose or action of God in salvation history, previously hidden, but now revealed by God to His people. It has to do with things hidden in the past, but now made known by God. In Ephesians 3, for example, Paul speaks of the mystery once hidden but now revealed, that through faith in Christ, Gentiles are now equal beneficiaries with the Jews of the promises of God and are equal members of God’s family (Ephesians 3:6-12).

Here in Romans 11, however, the “mystery” that Paul has in mind is God’s plan to save His covenant people who have, for now, rejected Him. What the apostle says here mirrors what he said earlier in chapter 11, in talking about the three successive stages in God’s plan for the salvation of all who believe, both Jew and Gentile.

First, as we see in verse 25, God has allowed – or caused? – a partial “hardening” of the Jews, a hardening of their hearts that is partial (not total) and temporary (not permanent). It is partial in the sense that, as we have already seen, not all Jews have rejected Jesus and the gospel. The fact that there has been and always will be a remnant of believing Jews, a “loyal minority,” as Eugene Peterson calls them, means that the turning away of the Jews from God is not total. And the fact that this hardening is in effect only “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in” to the kingdom of God shows that it is temporary and not final or forever.

This hardening of their hearts in unbelief becomes the opportunity and impetus for Gentiles to believe and to become part of the people of God. But this is not the end of the story, because, as Paul has been saying, God is not finished with the Jewish people. Though he is short on the details, Paul says in verse 26 (echoing verse 12): “And so all Israel will be saved.”

Wow! What a radical statement that is! What Paul means by “all Israel” has been understood in different ways by different people for 20 centuries now. We will take a closer look at this in two weeks. (I’ve asked Pastor David to preach next Sunday.) Feel free to study up on it.

What is certain is that all of this showcases God’s mercy, which is something we all need. Jews need it and so do non-Jews. Presbyterians need it and so do Catholics. Republicans need it and so do Democrats. Liberals need it and so do conservatives. There is no one who

does not stand in need of the generous, undeserved, and just mercy of God, who will never leave His people – including you and me – without a future and a hope.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.