

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 5, 2017**

**A FUTURE AND A HOPE (3)**

**Romans 11:25-36**

This morning, as we resume our trek through the challenging theological terrain of Romans 11, I invite you to turn to it in your Bible. We begin our reading at verse 25. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

Prayer: Your Word, O God, contains truths that boggle our minds and properly humble us by showing us that Your wisdom and Your ways are way over our heads. Still, by Your Holy Spirit, You desire us to comprehend Your truth and to be changed by it. So reveal Your truth to us today as we examine Your Word. Help us to embrace it and to live by it. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Two Sundays ago, when we last looked at Romans 11 together, we zoomed in on Paul's analogy of the olive tree in verses 17-24, with the natural branches of the tree broken off and wild olive shoots grafted in. The natural branches broken off symbolize the Jewish people who have largely refused to accept the gospel and have rejected Jesus as the Messiah and Savior sent from God. As a result of their unbelief, they have been removed from the olive tree representing the redeemed people of God. The wild olive shoots grafted in represent Gentiles (non-Jews) who believe the gospel and become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Though this is what has happened, the apostle Paul holds out hope that many of the Jewish people – the natural branches that were broken off due to their unbelief – will be brought to faith in Jesus Christ as the true Son of God, Savior of sinners, and Lord of all, and will be grafted into the olive tree of God's people.

One thing important for us to recognize here is that there is only one olive tree that stands for God's people, not two. There are not two separate trees, one for the Jewish people and another for believing Gentiles. There is not one way of salvation for Jews and another for Gentiles. There is but one way to be saved – through faith in Jesus Christ and His saving work for us – and one tree, one people of God, made up of believing Jews and believing Gentiles, all of whom are accepted by God on the same basis – by grace alone (that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will) through faith alone (which is itself a gift from God) in Jesus Christ alone.

We also took note last time of the inescapable fact that everybody needs mercy. *Everybody*. There is no one who does not need mercy. Which makes it such great news that *God*. *Is Merciful*. As David says in Psalm 103, the Lord "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (103:10). If He *did* treat us as our sins deserve, if He *did* pay us back in full for all our wrongs, if He were *not* merciful to us, we would all be in heap big trouble.

Every one of us. Because what we deserve from God is not mercy or grace, but judgment and punishment for our disobedience. Part of the beauty of the gospel is the realization and affirmation and declaration that *God. Is. Merciful. God. Is Gracious.* No one deserves to be included in the olive tree of God's people. No one. We all deserve to be cut off and thrown away. But God has made room for us and for all who believe the gospel. For all who believe in Jesus His Son. For all who turn to Him in true repentance and faith. God is merciful to sinners. Like you and me. This ought to make your heart soar with joy and praise unending to God.

Now, as I promised two weeks ago, I want to take a look with you at Paul's remarkable statement in verse 26, where he says: "And so all Israel will be saved." To give it some context, let's look at what Paul says beginning in verse 25: "I do not want you to be ignorant" or uninformed "about this mystery, lest you become conceited. Israel has experienced a partial hardening" of their hearts "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" to the kingdom of God. "And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

The Deliverer will come from Zion;  
He will turn godlessness away from Jacob,  
And this is my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins."  
(11:25-27)

The Deliverer to come from Zion is none other than Jesus. Jesus is the One who will save "all Israel." He is the only One who *can* save "all Israel." He is the only One who can save anyone, Jew or Gentile.

The question to which we want an answer is this: What does Paul mean when he says that "all Israel will be saved"? R. C. Sproul calls it "a revelatory bombshell" (Sproul, *Before the Face of God, Vol. 1*, 358), referring to the mystery (verse 25) once concealed but now revealed regarding "the full number of the Gentiles" to be followed by the salvation of "all Israel."

Throughout church history, theologians have given different explanations of this "bombshell." Four main interpretations have been proposed. One view is that "all Israel" refers to the church, meaning all of God's people, both Jews and Gentiles, who are saved through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the view of John Calvin, who wrote in his *Commentary on Romans* (255): "I extend the word *Israel* to include all the people of God," so that, when the full number of the Gentiles has come in and the Jews have returned to God, "the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be gathered from both, will thus be completed."

A second view is that "all Israel" refers to the faithful remnant of the Jews, which is to say, the total number of God's elect Jews throughout history. Not *all* Jews, but all *believing* Jews.

A third view is that "all Israel" means *all* Israel – that is, the entire nation of Israel, including every ethnic Jew, every descendant of Jacob who has ever lived.

A fourth view is that “all Israel” refers to Israel as a whole, as a nation or people, who will come to faith in Christ, be restored to God, and receive salvation at a time yet in the future, a time to be determined by God, when there will be a mass conversion of the Jewish people in connection with the second coming of the Lord Jesus at the end of history.

I’m not going to give you all the arguments for and against each of these views. I will tell you which view I think is right, with the understanding that I could be wrong.

I do not think “all Israel” refers to the faithful remnant of Jewish believers, in part because it does not seem to me that Paul would call that a “mystery” (11:25). That God would save those believing Jews who followed Him faithfully throughout history was not and is not a mystery once hidden but now made known. It has always been the case.

Nor do I think “all Israel” means every single Jew who has ever lived or will ever live. It is clear that those of the people of Israel who refuse to accept the message of the gospel, who persist in their unbelief, will not be saved. For there is only one way to be saved for Jews and Gentiles alike – through faith in the person and work of Jesus our Savior. Romans 11:26 is not a promise that every Jew who ever lived will be saved.

Nor is it, I think, a reference to the church, as Calvin and others have suggested, though Paul does speak of the church as “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16. The difference is that here in Romans 11 and elsewhere in Romans, most often when Paul speaks of Israel, he is referring to the ethnic nation of Israel – to the historical Jewish people – not to the church, which is in some ways “the new Israel.” In the context of Romans 11, though, it seems evident that what Paul has in mind is not the church consisting of both Jewish and Gentile believers, but the Jewish people as a whole.

The view that seems right to me is the fourth – that “all Israel” means the nation or people of Israel as a whole. It does not mean that every single Jew, past or present, living or dead, will be saved. Nor does it mean that just a remnant will come to faith in Christ. Paul, it seems, is speaking prophetically of a kind of great spiritual awakening among the Jewish people. It does not necessarily mean that every individual member of ethnic Israel will be saved. It does not necessarily mean “every Jew without exception,” but it does mean Israel “as a whole” (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Romans*, 209). Some kind of large-scale, mass conversion of the Jewish nation to faith in Christ will take place.

When will this happen? Soon, I hope. But we don’t know. What we do know is that it will take place when “the full number of the Gentile (believers) has come in” to God’s family (11:25). Paul does not say if it will happen rapidly or gradually over a period of time. And, of course, we don’t know when Jesus the Deliverer (11:26) is coming back. It may be very soon. It may not. What we do know, as Sproul says, is that every passing day brings us closer to the fulfillment of all the Bible’s prophecies, including those in Romans 11 (Sproul, 361).

To return to the question with which Paul began Romans 11: Has God rejected His people Israel? Has He given up on His covenant people? Does Israel have a future and a hope?

Albert Einstein, himself a Jew, who declined an offer to become the second president of the modern state of Israel, rejected the idea that the Jews are God's chosen people or have any special relationship with God. In a letter written near the end of his life he said: "For me the Jewish religion like all others is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions. And the Jewish people to whom I gladly belong and with whose mentality I have a deep affinity have no different quality for me than all other people. As far as my own experience goes, they are no better than other human groups, although they are protected from the worst cancers by a lack of power. Otherwise I cannot see anything 'chosen' about them."

Einstein was right that the Jewish people are no better than others. The Bible is very clear on that. They were not chosen by God because they were better than anyone else. They weren't. Nor were they any worse. Einstein, regrettably, did not have a high view of religion. *Any* religion. And it seems strange, in a letter written less than a decade after the end of World War II, that he would speak of the Jewish people being "protected from the worst cancers by a lack of power." What worse cancer can you think of than the Holocaust and what it represented?

The main reason I share this with you is because Einstein is a prominent example of those who believe that Israel has no special relationship with God and no special place in the plan of God, if it ever did. Questioning Israel's relationship with God in light of the Holocaust is certainly understandable. But even the Holocaust, I'm sure, unspeakably evil as it was, would not cause Paul to pull back from his Holy Spirit-driven conviction that God had not, has not, and will not ever give up on or abandon the people He sovereignly chose to be His own.

Has God rejected His people Israel? Has He given up on them as a result of their persistent unbelief and disobedience. *No. Not now. Not ever.* God *will* fulfill the covenant promises He made to His people Israel. You can bet your life on it. As Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles in Babylon at another dark time in their history: "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" (Jeremiah 29:11). Even today, there is still a future and a hope for the Jewish people, whose Heavenly Father (and ours) is waiting for them to come home to Him.

God's ways *are* mind-boggling. We will never figure it all out this side of heaven. The mystery of the gospel – that Jesus is the all-sufficient and only Savior of Jews and non-Jews alike – has been revealed for all to see and hear and know and believe. But some mysteries remain – mysteries of just when and where and how God will bring His plan of redemption and reconciliation to final fulfillment.

When we reach the end of our understanding, the only reasonable thing to do is what Paul does in the closing verses of Romans 11 – which is to break forth in doxology, to sing and declare the *doxa*, the glory and greatness of God:

Oh, how deep are the riches  
of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable are His judgments,  
and how inscrutable His ways!

For *from Him* –  
He is the Source, the Creator of everyone and everything  
and *through Him* –  
He sustains all things and provides  
all that we need for life in this world –  
and *to Him* –  
for the purpose of His glory –  
are all things –  
including you and me and the church and the world,  
every molecule and atom and sub-atomic particle,  
every detail and circumstance and situation  
that ever was or ever will be.  
To Him be the *doxa* –  
to Him be the glory forever.  
Amen? Amen!  
(11:33, 36)

Lord, let it be so, forever and ever. Amen and amen.