

Sermons through

Romans

God Is Able

Romans 11:23-27

With Study Questions

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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? ²⁵ For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: *“The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; ²⁷ For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins”* (Romans 11:23-27).

Introduction

What we have before is a hotly debated passage of Scripture. It might be helpful to offer a bit of advice when we are encountered with a text that godly, respectable, Spirit-filled theologians see quite differently from each other.

- Charitable
- Assumptions
- Prophecy – Not Proleptic History
- Clear Interprets Unclear

First, we must seek to be charitable toward one another. We should have no desire to vilify people with whom we disagree. There certainly are theological/doctrinal boundaries which must be set, but we should not be overly suspicious. Not every person who has been poorly instructed or poorly instructs is a Pharisee.

Secondly, we must all recognize that our own theological assumptions will yield various results when we engage the Scriptures. We are all fond of saying that we only desire the Bible have its way – that it says what it says – no more no less. In a recent discussion with one of my

children who finds herself on the other side many theological discussions with her classmates, she wondered if she would have embraced those other positions if she had been raised in those churches by those instructors. She made a poignant observation. Let us all be aware of that. Yet if our theological predispositions are constantly at odds with passages in Scripture, we should prayerfully considering altering our views.

Thirdly, we should recognize that prophecy (since it is the uniformed position that the passage before us contains that which is, at least, future to the Apostle) is not proleptic history. As Charles Hodges taught, it is not designed to give us knowledge of the future which history gives us of the past. Great events are foretold; but the mode of their occurrence, their details and their consequences can only be learned by the event. The prophecies which in hindsight were clearly fulfilled by Christ were not as clear before they actually happened (e.g. that the Savior would be from Bethlehem, Egypt, a Nazarene – Matthew 2:5, 6; 15; 23 was much clearer after those prophecies were fulfilled). I generally find myself unconvinced when modern-day prognosticators point to current events as the fulfillment of prophecy. It is exciting but may not be terribly sound.

Finally, we should be careful when we conclude, by the reading of a difficult portion of Scripture, that the lessons we learned from simpler passages must be overturned or corrected. It is a very important principle in Bible interpretation that the clear interprets the unclear and not vice-versa.

In verses 23 and 24 Paul, still addressing the temptation to boast, explains what God is capable of doing. Then in verses 25 and 26 he explains what God is doing and will do.

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 (Romans 11:23-24)?

God is Able

Having been given the warning that the church must ever be governed and inhabited by those who are of faith in Christ – lest they be

“cut off” (Romans 11:22), he now begins to show how those who were cut off were not necessarily finally and forever cut off. As discussed earlier, the Israelite (Paul’s fellow countrymen for whom he prayed) had not so entered into a level of reprobation that there was no hope for them – as was the case for some (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah, see Hebrews 6:4-6; Romans 1:24, 26).

One must wonder if the Apostle donned a hopeful smile (his desire for the salvation of his fellow Jew being so strong – see Romans 9:1-3; 10:1) while writing these words – if they (the Israelite who had rejected Christ) do not continue in unbelief – **“God is able to graft them in again.”** There is something very rich and joyous when a prodigal returns – it makes you want to run and embrace and kiss and kill the fatted calf (Luke 15:20-23).

Note that Paul’s hope for his fellow Israelite depended not in the power of his friends to come to their senses (though that may have certainly entered the equation at some level), but on the **“power” *dynatos*** of God to graft them in again. Man’s natural condition of unbelief (Romans 3:10-18) can only be overcome by the power of God. Certainly we are all called to do our part. But apart from the power of God, every single word – no matter how true or redemptive – would fall upon deaf ears and stony hearts.

And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

An old friend recently told me that we will never agree on religion or politics. I was not quite as concerned with the politics as with the not-so-veiled assertion that he will never believe in Jesus. Perhaps he is right. Many of us have that same disposition about our entire culture. Like Abraham who was promised his descendants would outnumber the stars, he hoped against hope that that would actually occur (Romans 4:18). But our hope and comfort must always be found in the words **“God is able.”**

Natural Branches

Not only is God able to re-graft the apostate Israelite back into that stream of redemption – the living waters which flow from Christ, **“a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14)** – it would be a much more natural fit. The gentile Christian after all was like a **“wild olive”** grafted into that holy root.

Not being raised in the church I recall as a teenager going to church and finding it all a bit awkward. I didn't know how to dress; I was unfamiliar with the songs; didn't know when to stand or sit or why we did certain things in the liturgy. I didn't know the stories in the Old Testament like those kids who had been raised in the church. The whole event (that entire season of my life) was very unnatural. All I knew was that I believed the Bible and that Jesus died for my sins.

I think what Paul is saying here is that when the Jew would turn to Christ and enter back into that community full of the hope and promises seen in the Old Testament, he would now know that those promises were fulfilled in Christ.

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory (2 Corinthians 1:20).

He would know the liturgy; he would know the promises, better than the gentile Christian. And as a believer, he would now know what it all means; if his fall meant riches for the world, how much more his fullness (Romans 11:12).

This is what God is able to do. But what was God doing and what will God do? Paul desired his readers to know.

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; ²⁷ For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins” (Romans 11:25-27).

Two Covenants? Two Peoples of God?

And here the plot thickens! So many differing opinions! What is meant by the “**mystery**” *mysterion*? How should we understand “**in part apo merous...the fullness of the Gentiles to pleroma ton ethnon...And so kai houtos...all Israel pas Israel**”?

The number of opinions regarding these things are far too numerous to address in a single sermon. Suffice it to say that it is precisely here that we see people’s theological assumptions drive their exegesis (sometimes almost mad). If I may briefly suggest some theological boundaries that should not be crossed in our reading of the passage, then finish with what (at least to me) appears to be the most natural reading of the text.

Perhaps the most dangerous, prominent reading of this passage is one which suggests that Israel has maintained its favored status before God – even while rejecting the Messiah. The position is under major modification, but there are/were those who believe in a sort of dual-covenant theology¹ where the Jew would be saved in a different manner than the gentile.

Others, in a related camp (realizing that a Christ-less Christianity must be rejected) have modified this view in such a way that the Jews will be saved by Christ – but not by evangelism so much as by the immediate presence of Christ. They will behold him with their eyes at His coming (John 19:37: Revelation 1:7). According to this view, it will be then that Christ will fulfill all the promises – including the land – made to Israel.

Briefly stated (for there are many subsets within this understanding) the promises made to Israel have temporarily been put on hold while the church age (which focuses mainly on the gentiles – the fullness of the gentiles) takes place. At the conclusion of the church age, God will grant all the promises He made to the ethnic Israelite in a future Millennium – and so “all Israel will be saved.”

Though this schema is virtually invisible if one searches the history of the theology of the church from the fathers of the first and second centuries all through the Reformation and after (from the early councils 200-400 to

¹ T.R. Schreiner notes: “Another question that should be answered before investigating these three possibilities is whether the salvation promised is based on faith in Christ. It has become increasingly popular to argue that Paul envisioned salvation for Jews here apart from faith in Christ. Some have espoused a two-covenant theory in which Gentiles are saved by faith in Christ, and Jews by adhering to Torah.”

about 1830), it has become the predominant view in the west in the past hundred years due large to C.I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Charles Ryrie, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, etc.

It is a very exciting and sensational approach and has yielded an unending stream of novels, movies, conferences and predictions – rabbit trails perhaps!? I think the natural reading is much less likely to become a blockbuster, albeit much more redemptive. At the risk of saying too much, the Apostle Paul may be dismayed to find that his theology has led untold numbers of hasty predictions rather to where he seemed to focus, which was the taking **“away their sins” (Romans 11:27)**.

No, this focus upon ethnic Israel seems to be just the opposite of what he has been writing about for three chapters. And the notion that there is a separate plan and unique promises for a certain segment of believer wars against what he labors in nearly every epistle – there all believers should view themselves as **“one new man” (Ephesians 2:15)**.

What God Is Doing

If we stay within the flow of thought already penned by the Apostle, we will not find ourselves jettisoned to the end of the world, or gravitating toward some alternative, secondary method of salvation. We will simply find ourselves given a sound explanation of what God is doing in history.

“Blinding in part has happened to Israel” means that most but not all Israelites have not embraced Jesus. Until Paul’s very day whenever Moses was read a veil would lie **“over their hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:15)**. The **“mystery”** is that God would, through their fall would bring salvation to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11), then through jealousy (as discussed earlier) some of the Jews would be saved (Romans 11:14).

When we read the phrase **“until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in”** we should not be too quick to view that merely in a temporal sense – as if it ends and then God deals once again with Israel. I heard one popular end-times teacher suggest that God has a specific number of gentiles he is going to save and when that last gentile is saved it will signal time for the rapture (at which time God will again turn His attention to Israel). He then offered the possibility that that gentile might be at his Bible study that night.

When Paul writes that Jesus must reign **“until he has put all his enemies under his feet”** (1 Corinthians 15:25), he is not teaching that there will be a time when Jesus will no longer reign. So when Paul writes that the blindness has happened to Israel **“until the fullness of Gentiles has come in”** it may be, as Calvin put it, **“...the same thing, as though he had said, “That the fullness of the Gentiles (come in).”**²

Onto the phrase **“And so all Israel will be saved.”** Very respectable theologians disagree on who **“all Israel”** is so I tread lightly. Some teach that **“all Israel”** here refers to ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus – and that is certainly possible. Others hold that Paul is speaking of all true believers in Christ. The second makes most sense to me for a couple of reasons.

First, as mentioned earlier, Paul has dedicated tireless effort to instill in the hearts of his readers the unity of the body of Christ. I tend to shy away from positions which seem to stratify or unnecessarily diversify the oneness we all are in Christ.

Secondly, and more directly, Paul does not hesitate to identify believers (and only believers) as true descendants of Abraham.

Therefore know that *only* those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” ⁹ So then those who *are* of faith are blessed with believing Abraham... ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you *are* Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:7-9; 28, 29).

Galatians 6:16 is also persuasive, where the church is called **“The Israel of God.”**

Our final project is to attach the **“and so”** to salvation of **“all Israel.”** Some would understand that as **“and then”** that is, in a temporal sense. But **“and so”** *kai houtos* seldom has that meaning. It more generally means **“and thusly”** or **“in this manner.”** When Paul is teaching how those who preach the gospel should earn their living, he gives the example of those

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 11:25). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Old Covenant servants who worked at the altar and how they would share in the sacrificial offerings (1 Corinthians 9:13). Using the same words *houtos kai* he then offers his conclusion: **“In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14).**

We should not view Paul’s words here as a shocking divergence from what he has already been teaching. In summary: The majority of the Israelites received not the Messiah – the message then turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46) – subsequently through a sort of jealousy, the Jews would begin to turn back to Christ³--and the final outcome would be that all true believers (the true Israel) would be saved. God’s word had not failed. He is the covenant making, covenant keeping God.

Let us not neglect the heart of this covenant. God would send “The Deliverer” out of Zion. A bit of a New Covenant slant (Isaiah 59:20 has the Deliverer coming to Zion).

By “Zion” Paul refers to the heavenly Jerusalem from which the Lord comes rather than his place of origin, descent from David, or Jesus’ death and resurrection in Jerusalem.⁴

Our naturally ungodly hearts will find themselves overwhelmed by the love, grace and mercy of a God who is able to overcome the most obstinate sinner. And Paul culminates his message with that message which should be a primary component of every gathering of His covenant people – for this is His covenant with us, when He will take away our sins. Let our hearts now fully turn there as we approach the Lord’s Table.

³ Some believe this would be more of a unique revival at the end of history, others believe this would be the normal work of evangelism throughout history.

⁴ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 619). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Questions for Study

1. How should we navigate through passages of Scripture where godly, respectable, Spirit-filled believers/theologians disagree (pages 2, 3)?
2. Where did the Apostle Paul's hope lie when it came to the salvation of his fellow countrymen (pages 3, 4)?
3. Discuss the natural branches versus the wild olives grafted in. What might be the actual differences between these groups of people (page 5)?
4. Is it possible that different groups of people may be saved in an entirely different manner? Discuss the notion of two covenants or two peoples of God (pages 6, 7).
5. What are the various ways people understand what God is doing in history as it relates to Romans 11:25-27? What makes most sense to you and why (pages 7-9)?