

God's Purpose for Israel

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[0 : 0 0] Today we're continuing our study on Sunday mornings in Paul's letter to the Romans. And we've come to chapter 11, which is what we're going to focus on today. And just to focus our minds, we can read again, verses 25 to 27.

Lest you be wise in your sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers. A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way, all Israel will be saved as it is written.

The deliverer will come from Zion. He will banish ungodliness from Jacob. And this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.

The last two or three weeks here, we've been looking at Romans chapters 9, 10 and 11, which in many ways are a very significant and in some ways unique section, not just of the letter to the Romans, but also the whole of the New Testament, because it's focusing very much on the whole question of the Jewish people, the Israelites.

And that actually ties in with the great theme of the letter to the Romans. This letter, which Paul, one of the early Christians, Christian leaders, wrote to a congregation that was being formed in the Empire's capital of Rome, is focusing really on one big theme.

[1 : 1 6] And that's the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul's explaining how Christianity works. And back at the beginning, he said, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

And Paul, in this letter and in other letters, is emphasizing the wonderful point that whether you are a Jew or whether you are a non-Jew, a Greek or a Gentile, and you see that word Gentile, it just means someone who's not a Jew.

If you're a Jew or a non-Jew, it makes no difference. Salvation is found in the good news of Jesus Christ.

But the experience of the early church raised a situation that was potentially hard for people to understand. So when we're reading this letter, we have to think back to the context of the early church in just these very early decades after Jesus died and rose again.

If you think about that situation, you have this Christian message that has emerged from the heartland and heritage of Judaism. So Jesus himself lived the life of a Jew in many ways.

[2 : 3 4] He went to the synagogue, he went to the temple. His message and the message of the followers that he had were grounded in the Jewish scriptures of the Old Testament.

And all the key events of Jesus' life took place in Jewish territory, particularly around the city of Jerusalem. So at first glance, it's all really Jewish.

But as the early church began to proclaim its message, by far the majority of people who were converted were non-Jews.

In other words, the Jews were rejecting the gospel, while at the same time, many, many non-Jews were responding to this message and were trusting in Jesus and following him.

And for many people at this time, they must have thought, what's going on? And this is the issue that Paul is addressing in chapters 9, 10 and 11.

[3 : 38] Chapter 9 and 10 make two really important points. One is personal for Paul and one is theological. The personal point that he makes is that he himself longs for his fellow Jews to be saved.

Paul himself was a Jew, a very, very committed Jew before his conversion, but his primary role now is actually to reach non-Jews. He's called an apostle to the Gentiles, someone who's been sent to the people of other nations.

But even though his work is primarily among non-Jews, he's still got this burning passion to see his kinsmen, his fellow Israelites coming to faith in Jesus.

So that's the personal point that's really prominent in these chapters. The theological point that he wants to also emphasize is the fact that this situation now facing the Jews is not a failure on God's part.

And that was an easy accusation to make. You could say, well, God had all this heritage with all these people and everything seemed to be pointing and coming together for the Jews. And then all of a sudden it's not working and you think, God, what have you done?

[4 : 45] And it's easy to blame God. Paul is saying, no, this is not a failure on God's part. And we looked at this a wee bit last week and saw that Israel repeatedly tried to approach God in the wrong way and on the wrong terms.

And tragically, they actually pushed away the grace that God was showing to them. And it's powerfully summed up in the last verse of chapter 10, where Paul writes, of Israel, God says, all day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.

And that raises another question. So you would read to the end of chapter 10 and you'd think, well, okay, the Jews seem to be rejecting Jesus and the non-Jews seem to be accepting Jesus.

So the question that probably logically should arise in our heads is, has God given up on the Jews? And Paul is wonderful at anticipating a question because the very first thing he says in chapter 11 is, I ask then, has God rejected his people?

And the answer is absolutely clear. He says, no way by no means has God given up on the Jews.

[6 : 08] And then in the rest of the chapter, Paul explains how the good news of Jesus Christ is still good news for the Jews. So I want us just to look together at this chapter and see how Paul's argument fits together.

This chapter is simultaneously simple and complicated. God made it simple, but we humans have made it complicated because the actual argument of the chapter is fairly straightforward, but there's a lot of different opinions as to what everything means.

But let's just dive in and have a go and see where this takes us. So first of all, let's just summarize so we know exactly that we understand what Romans 11 is saying because as we read it, it's one of these chapters where it's easy to get a wee bit lost and to be a wee bit unsure what's going on.

So let's just go through very simply and very briefly. As we said, Paul starts with a question. He says, has God rejected his people? He says, no, he absolutely has not. Then he gives evidence to back up the claim.

So he says, I'm evidence that God hasn't abandoned the Jews. I was a Jew and I have come to faith. Then he goes back to the Old Testament and he uses the example of Elijah.

[7 : 27] Elijah was a prophet in the Old Testament. He spoke on behalf of God, but he did so at a time when on the face of it, it looked like everybody was rejecting God. And Elijah himself thought, I'm the only one left.

And God said, no, no, there's still 7000 who have not turned away from me. And a couple to that is this big word that Paul uses, the word remnant, which is a really important Old Testament word, highlighting the fact that even though often the majority of people in Israel abandoned God, there was always a faithful core, a remnant whom God maintained.

But for many, the Israelites rejected God and as a result, God hardened their hearts. And the privileges that they had, and this is a really solemn point, the privileges that they had actually became a stumbling block.

And it's as though they just pushed God away and the division just became deeper and deeper and deeper.

Paul then says, well, okay, is God's objective just for these Israelites to fall away? Is that his plan? Does he just want it to be an end of story for the Israelites? He says, no, absolutely not.

[8 : 52] He says, in fact, God was working it for good. And then in verses 11 to 15, he sets out what's been called quite often a chain of blessing. And I'm just going to read the verses and have this idea of a chain of blessing from one to another, from Jew to Gentile, Gentile to Jew.

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means, rather, through their trespass, salvation has come to the Gentiles. So a blessing came to the Gentiles. So as to make Israel jealous.

Now, if their trespass means riches for the world and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean? Now, speaking to you Gentiles, inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them.

For if their rejection means reconciliation from the world, what then will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? What's that saying? Well, basically what Paul is saying there, he's saying that the Jews' hardness and rejection actually led to a blessing to the Gentiles.

So they rejected it, but that meant that good came to the Gentiles. As good comes to the Gentiles, the Israelites see that and want it and they're drawn to it as well.

[10 : 07] And then their inclusion becomes an even greater blessing because more and more and more and more people will see the transformation that God's salvation brings in people's lives. There's this great chain of blessing from Jew to Gentile to Jew to Gentile, all benefiting from the way that God is working out his purposes of salvation.

Then Paul moves on to an image of an olive tree. You remember Israel was reading all about an olive tree, about branches broken off, grafted in. And the great point of that picture is to emphasize the unity of Jew and Gentile in Jesus Christ.

So the natural branches, the Jews, it was as though they were cut off because they rejected God. And the wild branches, the non-Jews, were stuck in, grafted in.

But Paul is saying there's still room for the natural branches to return. In fact, that's where they belong. That's where they should come. And it's all building up to the key point of the passage, which is that God has not permanently cut off and abandoned the Jewish people.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation to Jew and Greek together. And he sums it all up towards the end when he says, even though Israel had rejected God, his great purpose is that all Israel will be saved, as Paul says there in verse 26.

[11 : 35] So let's just recap very quickly. Here's the summary of the chapter. It's there before you. Has God rejected his people? No. And he gives evidence as to why that's not the case. Then talks about a chain of blessing, going from Jew to Gentile, to Jew to Gentile.

That blessing culminates in the fact that Jew and non-Jew, Jew and Gentile, are now combined as one tree. He uses that image of a tree, one body, and the goal is that all Israel will be saved.

Simple? Yeah. That's nice and clear. The challenge arises from the fact that there's different views, lots of different views about these various steps.

And sometimes it's really tempting for me when I'm preaching, you prepare a sermon, and you think, okay, I'm just not going to talk about all the different views. But I think that's me taking the easy option, really.

I think it's actually far better to set before you the fact that there are different views, because I want you to think as well, and to think these things through. And I really want to emphasize that different views are held by people who are absolutely rock solid in terms of their theology.

[12 : 54] So people whom we share really close convictions with, on whom we agree with all the fundamental points of Christian theology, they'll have different views.

So in studying for Romans, two of the best common themes I've been using. One is by John Stott, and one is by a man called Stuart Oliot, who you may not have heard of, two brilliant common themes, two really solid biblical, evangelical, reformed Christians.

They've got different opinions. So you read one, and you think, oh great, and you read the other one, and you're like, oh. So there's difference of opinions.

There's four key questions that arise related to these points here. The first question is, you look at that question, has God rejected his people? And verse one mentions his people.

The question is, who are his people? Okay? Question. This chain of blessing that we're talking about, Jew, Gentile, Jew, Gentile, how does that work?

[14 : 02] Is it something that runs in like a linear line? Okay? So a period for Jews, a period for Gentiles, a period for Jews, a period for Gentiles. One long line running across history?

Or is it something that's continuously happening? Blessing from Jew to Gentile to Jew to Gentile, Jew to Gentile, again and again and again. That's the other question. Third question, are Jews and Gentiles to be kept distinct in God's plan?

Okay? So are there certain things that apply to the Jews, and certain things that apply to the Gentiles? And then last of all, who is all Israel?

Okay? Verse 26 says, all Israel, who is that? These are the questions we have to ask. And I thought just to try and make it simple, I would just summarize different views, okay?

Now, I find this kind of thing really interesting. Maybe some people don't, but I think this is really interesting. And I hope that you do too, because it is fascinating to look at the differences of opinion. So question one, who are His people?

[15 : 10] Some will say the nation of Israel, okay? But some will say the elect within Israel. So you've got option one there that says it's the nation of Israel.

There's a linear chain of blessing running across history, okay? So this chapter is talking about from the past to the future. Jews and Gentiles are to be kept distinct, and all Israel is the nation of Israel.

That's one view. Option two, a bit similar, but a bit different. Yes, it's the nation of Israel, yes, it's linear, but they are not to be kept separate, and all Israel is a great number of Jews who will come to faith at some point in the future.

Other option three will say that it's the elect within Israel. Not the whole nation, but just God's chosen people, that remnant. The chain of blessing is continuous.

So it's not so much looking to the future, it's just talking about how things happen again and again. Jews and Gentiles should not be kept separate, and all Israel is referring to the church.

[16:16] That's a quick summary. I'll go through these in a little bit more detail, because I think it's, I hope that'll be helpful. Option one takes quite a literal approach to the passage. So reads Romans 11 and takes everything really quite literally, and will say, every reference to Israel is a reference to the nation of Israel.

And that has led in the last 70 or so years to a big enthusiasm about what is the modern state of Israel. So people holding to option one will say that the formation of modern Israel in 1948 is a big moment in God's plan.

That's what they would say. And this approach, option one, in many ways it takes a view of history that puts different periods into very clearly defined blocks.

So there's like one block here, which is when God created the world. There's another block here, which is the Old Testament. There's another block here, which is when Jesus was on earth.

There's another block here, which is when the Gospel is going to the Gentiles. And there's another block here when, again, the nation of Israel will have a big prominent place in God's plan.

[17:30] So these blocks are kept very distinct and very separate from each other. And that chain of blessing is a chronological step from one block to the next block to the next block.

And within that, Israel and the church are kept very separate. So there's certain promises for the church in this block and there's certain promises for Israel in this block.

So everything's kept very, very distinct. And all Israel refers to the nation of Israel. Now, these blocks, the technical word for these blocks is dispensations.

And so this whole view is often called dispensationalism. I was hoping that blocky theology might take off as a term. But it says it's just blocks, these blocks.

So that's one view. Option two does not take that same blocky approach, but it still holds to a linear view of history. And that chain of blessing still has a particular blessing for ethnic Israel.

[18:44] The key difference there is in the third line between option one and option two, the Jews and Gentiles no longer remain separate. They are brought together. And in the future, there'll be this great in-gathering of Jews.

And so to them, the current nation of Israel is still important, but not as important. Option three is in a wee bit different again. And it strongly emphasizes the unity of Jew and Gentile and God's purposes.

But instead of looking at this linear chain of blessing, it says it's more just a continuous thing that goes on and on and on and on. And you might think to yourself, well, that's a bit strange.

You can't think that. But if you think about it, there's logic behind it, because when Paul talks about God not giving up on Israel, he uses himself as an example, which implies that this is something that's already happening.

It's not necessarily something that's entirely based in the future. And according to this view, all Israel is referring to the church.

[19:51] And that's the view that the true Israel is the people of God made up of Jew and Gentile. And according to option three, that true political nation of Israel today is not of any greater significance than any other nation.

And so you can see how divergent you can end up with. You can have option one where the nation of Israel is like really, really important in God's purposes. And then you can have option three, which says, well, actually it's not any more significant than any other nation at all.

And lots of different opinions exist. I would love to take a survey of a show of hands to see which ones you are. Difficult to say who is right.

I'll just be completely honest with you. I would not agree with option one. I would struggle to accept that clear kind of breach between Israel and the church, because I think that one of the big emphasis of the New Testament is the unity.

Option two is very strong. Lots of people who are far wiser than me hold to option two. But I think if you really pushed me, I would just nudge into option three.

[21 : 16] And the reason why I would do that is because I think we can easily be confused by the word Israel.

And when we hear the word Israel, we tend to think of a nation, don't we? But when you read the Bible, I think the primary emphasis on the word Israel is not so much on nation, but on family.

Because that's what the nation of Israel was, although it was as big as a nation, it was still a family. They had common ancestry. They were organised according to their family relations.

And I think the great message of the New Testament is that everybody, everybody is being called into that family as God's children.

And so I do think that there's actually a danger of actually lowering our expectations of what God's saying.

[22 : 23] Because we could say, wouldn't it be amazing if a huge number of Jews came to faith? That would be brilliant. That would be absolutely brilliant. But even more amazing would be if Jews, Gentiles, people from every nation came to faith in great numbers.

God's plans aren't just for the nation of Israel. They are way bigger than that. They're for everyone. Everybody is being called into God's family. The Gospel is amazing news for the Jews and it's amazing news for the Gentiles.

But if the Apostle Paul came in here today and he said option two is right, then I would be very happy to be with him. But this is something to think about. And I wanted to mention all that because if you're ever reading about Romans, or even if you're reading blogs or books or whatever, you'll hear about all of this kind of thing.

You'll hear people with strong views about the nation of Israel. You'll hear people talking about future events that may or may not take place. And this is where a lot of it comes from. And I just want you to be aware that there's differences of opinion in regard to it all.

But you might well be asking Thomas, what is the relevance of any of this? Because it seems a wee bit detached from life today. Well, I think it is actually really, really helpful for us to look at that.

[23 : 43] There's actually loads of lessons for us to learn from this passage. And I think first of all, this chapter actually teaches us really helpful lessons about reading the Bible.

Because we tell you all to read your Bible. You must read your Bible. It's a great thing to do. But probably people like me are guilty of not actually telling you how to read your Bible or giving you advice to help you.

And this passage and this whole issue that's been raised here gives us important practical lessons for reading the Bible. And I want to just highlight three. Number one, when you read a passage from the Bible, it's hard to understand.

Always, always remember that it's okay to ask questions. It's so easy to think, I shouldn't ask any questions. It's going to make me sound stupid. So often we can be in a group, a Bible study, a church setting, and think everybody else gets this and I don't.

And I can't really ask because I better not do that. It's so easy to just keep quiet. But please, please, please don't ever, ever, ever feel like that. Asking questions is a brilliant thing to do.

[24 : 48] Remember, when Jesus Christ was 12 years old, his parents left him behind in Jerusalem. And they found him again at the temple. And what was he doing at that temple?

He was asking people questions. And so never forget that it's really good to ask questions. Never be afraid to do that. You can ask an elder, you can ask me, you can ask Derek, you can ask the women in the congregation.

You can go and look things up in a good Bible commentary. It's always good to ask questions. And if you are the one who's asked the question, so if someone comes and asks you a question, I want you to remember two important things.

First of all, never, ever make someone feel silly for asking a question. That's a really important thing. Also, I want you to remember that it's okay to say, I don't know, or I'm not sure.

Often we're really afraid of that, but it's absolutely fine. Please, please remember you can say that. I don't know, I'm not sure. Always remember, at the heart of discipleship is learning.

[25 : 53] We're all learning together. And it's really good to ask questions. Secondly, I want you to remember for your Bible reading and for your own growth in the faith, that there are times when people who agree on the fundamental truths of Christianity will have different opinions on some of the details.

And that's a clear example here. People in all of these options would absolutely hold to the core teachings of the Bible, and yet they've got different views in this area.

It's really important that we listen to each other, that we respect one another, and that we make sure we never, ever, ever let these things cause division among us.

Falling out with somebody over a difference of opinion is absolutely tragic. And it's absolutely crazy. And if you ever fall out with a fellow Christian over an opinion or over an issue, you have to ask yourself a question, you have to ask yourself this.

Can I prove from the New Testament that the unity of God's family is less important to God than this issue that we are falling out over?

[27 : 17] And you will find that there are very, very few circumstances where the answer to that question is yes. And thirdly, we need to make sure that we don't impose our personal prejudices on our reading of the Bible.

And I do think that that's maybe something that's at risk here. It could be that our own personal political convictions, whatever they may be, could shape the way we read Romans 11.

And that's something that we have to be careful of. We respect these opinions, people are absolutely entitled to whatever political opinion they hold. And we're not in any way questioning that. But we need to be careful that our personal interests don't shape the way we read the Bible.

I can give you a very silly example from my own life. I've always had a very strong sympathy towards the disciple Thomas, because he's got the same name as me.

And so whenever I read about Thomas in the Bible, I'm on his side, which seems so silly. And that's probably fine most of the time, but it could shape the way I read the passage.

[28 : 33] And it could lead me to misunderstand the passage, because my preferences shape the way I read. And we have to think about that. Some people are hugely passionate about women's rights.

Some people are very pro-monarchy. Some people are very anti-monarchy or anti-establishment. Some people tend to really look at things in terms of class divisions. Some people don't like the kind of technical language that Paul often uses.

All of these opinions are absolutely fine, but we have to be very, very careful of the fact that these can shape the way we read the Bible. And the key point is this.

Our prejudices must not shape what we read in the Bible. The truth is actually the other way around.

What we read in the Bible should shape our prejudices. So what prejudices should we have from Romans chapter 11?

[29 : 38] Well, whatever your interpretation is, whatever your view on whether you're one, two or three, it doesn't really matter. I think there's four things that we must take from this passage, and there's going to be one minute on each of them.

First of all, we need to have a deep passion for the lost. And that's one of the core things that are clear from Romans 9, 10, 11, that Paul has a huge burden for people who are lost.

He has this burning desire that people would be saved. And I look at myself and I think, I wish I was more like that.

And all too often, I am numb to the lostness of the people around me. And all too often, we are bothered by things that we see in other people's lives.

And that's a sort of prejudice we have that I have. So we see things in people's lives and it bothers us. It bothers us the political views that people have. It bothers us the way people behave. It bothers us what football team they support.

[30 : 48] It bothers us the way they conduct themselves at work. There's loads of things that bother us about people. The thing that should bother us most about the people you see this week is the fact that they're lost.

That should be a core prejudice that shapes everything that we do. We must have that compassion for the lost.

Or two, we must have an absolute uncompromising loyalty to the unity of God's people. And the image that Paul uses of the olive tree is brilliant because it tells you whether you're a natural branch, a Jew, or a wild branch, a non-Jew, we all belong together as one in Jesus Christ.

That's why Paul says in this chapter, there should never be any boasting between Christians and there should never be any jealousy between Christians. And yet that's so easy, isn't it? It's so easy for us to look down on Christians who muck up.

And it's so easy for us to feel resentment towards the Christians who do well. We can be boastful, we can be jealous. And yet all of that is complete theological nonsense because none of us are anything but for the grace of God.

[32 : 08] And whether things go wrong or things go well, we should just stick together because we belong together. And if I am focusing on somebody else to the point where I feel superior to them because of their failings, or whether I am focusing on a person and I feel resentment towards them because they seem to be doing well, well, there's one thing that's certain.

If I'm focusing on that person or that person, I've stopped focusing on Jesus. But if we keep our focus on Jesus, all of us together, then that will help us to maintain our unity as God's people.

We want to just focus on who he is, on what he has done, on what he has taught us. We want this unflinching loyalty towards the unity of the church, the unity of God's people.

Our third prejudice should be longing to be a blessing to others. That's one of the great themes of this chapter. The people who come to faith in Jesus, whether they're Jews or Gentiles, they are a blessing to others.

And Paul speaks about something really interesting in this verse. There's a sense in which the conversions of the Gentiles makes the Jews envious.

[33 : 30] And we cannot sort of automatically think, well, that doesn't sound so good because we think of envious as a bad thing. But there is a sense in which we want our lives as Christians to make the world around us envious.

Not in a boastful sense on our part, but in the sense that you wanted to be the case that the people you come into contact this week, you want these people to look at your life and say, they have got something that I wish I had.

That's the kind of impression that we want to make on people. So we want this deep passion for the lost and unflinching loyalty to the unity of God's people, longing to be a blessing for others, and finally, and perhaps above all, a constant awareness of our dependence on grace.

Because at the heart of what Paul is saying in Romans 9, 10, 11, which is the same theme that's running through the whole of the letter and the whole of Scripture is the fact that we are all completely dependent on the grace of God.

Now, maybe in the future, there will be a prominent place for the nation of Israel. Maybe there will be a big in gathering of the Jews, or maybe it will be just a steady chain of continuous blessing between Jew and Gentile.

[34 : 47] I don't know for certain, but one thing we do know, every single person who becomes a follower of Jesus Christ does so because of the incredible grace and mercy of God.

And I think that's something that's really lying at the heart of what this chapter says. It's easy to look at a chapter like this and to think, who's got the advantage?

So some people will say, well, the Jews have the advantage. They've got all this stuff and all these blessings. Other people will say, well, the Gentiles have the advantage. They're the ones who are more important. So we kind of think, well, Jews are a wee bit more important. They've got this. Gentiles, they've got that.

And we're kind of competing as to who's got the better status before God. We can do that ourselves. We can think, well, I've got this heritage that makes me special. I've done this, or I've done that, or I've not done this. I've done that.

The truth is, every single person comes to God with nothing. And yet God, in his amazing love, will give you everything that you need.

[35 : 58] And so that's what matters more than anything else, to come to God and just totally throw yourself onto his grace, his mercy, his compassion.

We come to him, we say, Lord, we're sorry for all the wrong things that we've done. But because of who you are, because of what Jesus has done, I pray that you'd save me.

That's what the Jews need to do. That's what the Gentiles need to do. That's what you need to do. Amen.

God our Father, we thank you for your word. And it's got so much to teach us and so much for us to learn from. And we acknowledge that there are times and passages where we can't be completely sure which interpretation is the best.

But we pray that we would always just be ready to be taught, ready to learn, and that you would guide us and teach us. And we want to pray for the Jewish people, a people who have suffered enormously, a people who have been blessed in many, many ways.

[37 : 22] But in the midst of all of these things, their greatest need is for Jesus. And so we pray that you'd be at work among that people. And for all of us, most of us here, probably all of us who are non-Jews, who are Gentiles, we thank you, that you have kept your promise to bring blessing and salvation to all nations.

Help us to continue to spread that message. Amen.