

## ROMANS SERIES #29

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on Sunday, September 8, 1996 by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### ROMANS 11:1-36

#### GOD ALWAYS KEEPS HIS PROMISES!

Again, I remind you that in Romans 9-11 Paul discusses the nation of Israel, and God's place for Israel in world history. And chapter 11 is all about what is going to happen to Israel in the future and how God is going to prove His faithfulness by fulfilling the promises He has made all along to His chosen people, the Jews.

The Jews as a nation are a miracle because in spite of thousands of years of persecution they still survive. Geographically Israel is situated just where three continents, Africa, Asia, and Europe, converge. This has made the nation a kind of buffer zone; and for hundreds of years it was controlled by other people. And yet in spite of persecution and the Holocaust, the Jews are still around as a testimony to the faithfulness of God.

Now in the Old Testament God made a number of promises to the Jews as a nation; and many of those promises have not yet been fulfilled. So, the question is — What is going to happen to those promises? And that is what Romans 11 is all about. Romans 11 says that God is not finished with Israel and that all the promises He has made to them will yet be fulfilled in history.

In the outline you will see again a review of Romans 9-11. Romans 9 is about Israel's past; Romans 10 about Israel's present; and Romans 11 is about Israel's future. In Romans 9 we found that Israel was selected to be God's "chosen" people. And why did God choose the Jews? God says He chose them just because He chose them! That was it! It wasn't because they deserved to be chosen or because they were better than other people. He chose them purely because of His grace, His undeserved mercy.

And they were to be a blessing to the world by taking the Word of God and spreading it abroad. They were to be the missionaries to the rest of the world. Then as we examined Romans 10 we discovered that God has set aside the Jews temporarily because they didn't spread the message. God had to form a new channel of communication to take His Word to the world, and of course, that channel is the Christian Church.

But the question is — Are the Jews set aside permanently? And the answer is, "Not at all." And that's what Romans 11 is all about. So, we've seen God's sovereignty in chapter 9 — how He sovereignly chose the Jews. And we've seen God's fairness in chapter 10 where He says, "Anybody who believes can be saved." And now in Romans 11 we're going to see God's faithfulness; how all the promises He made to Israel long ago that have not been fulfilled, will yet be fulfilled in the future.

So, look at Romans 11:1. Paul says, “I ask then; did God reject His people (totally)? By no means!” And in Greek that is the strongest negative you can utter. It means “not on your life.” In no way has God permanently set His people aside. God has not given up on the Jews. And the rest of the chapter is devoted to explaining what that first verse is all about; and Paul rings the changes on this great truth concerning the faithfulness of God!

**I. So, the first thing Paul says is that the setting aside of the Jews as God’s chosen people is only PARTIAL; not COMPLETE.** (Verses 1-10) And Paul gives three different proofs to back up this statement:

**1. The first is personal.** He says, “Look at me! I’m proof of that. God hasn’t rejected me, a Jew, who had been a blasphemer and a persecutor of the Christians. I know that God didn’t reject me.”

**2. The second is historical.** In verses 2-5 he says that there has always been a “remnant,” a small group of Jews who have always believed God and been faithful to Him even when the nation itself was idolatrous. And he cites Elijah who said, “Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me. And what was God’s answer to him? ‘I have reserved for Myself 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ So, too, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace.”

You remember Elijah’s experience at Mount Carmel when the prophets of the pagan god Baal were discredited and slaughtered. But Queen Jezebel was furious at what had happened, and she vowed to have Elijah eliminated. So Elijah, who was not afraid of 400 prophets of Baal, was scared out of his wits by one woman! And he high-tailed it across the desert and held a pity party! “Oh God, poor me! I’m the only one left!” That’s so like us, isn’t it? Often after some mountaintop experience of God’s grace, we hit a low. There’s a valley after every mountaintop. And Elijah said to God, “Your people have rejected Your covenant.” (1 Kings 19:10) But Paul makes the point that God said to Elijah, “You say you’re the only one left? You’ve missed it by 6,999! There are at least 7,000 faithful Jews who have not bowed down to false gods.” You see, God has always had a small group of believers throughout history who trusted Him; and that’s the point Paul is making. That “remnant” in Paul’s day may have been quite sizeable. James was soon to tell Paul in Jerusalem that there were “many thousands” of believing Jews. (Acts 21:20)

**3. The third is theological.** Look at verse 5, “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.” What’s he saying here? He’s saying, “Let’s remember why God chose the Jews in the first place. It was by grace. He just chose them. It wasn’t based on their performance. So, since God’s choice of them was not based on their performance, they don’t lose their position because of their poor performance. They didn’t lose their designation as God’s chosen people just because they didn’t fulfill all God’s requirements.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us an example of what Paul is talking about. I must tell you that there are many godly Christians who believe that because Israel did not keep their part of the bargain and did not follow God at all times, therefore, the covenant is broken and God has no

further responsibility to Israel to keep His promises that He made to them. But in Jeremiah 31:31 the prophet says this, “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke My covenant.” Then in verse 34 he says, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” And in verse 37, “Only if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below be searched out, will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done, declares the Lord.” God says “No way: I’m just not going to reject My chosen people.”

So, Romans 11 answers the question, “Is God finished with Israel?” And the answer is “No.” Look at Psalm 89:30-33, “If his sons forsake My law and do not follow My statutes...I will punish their sins with the rod. . . but I will not take My love from him, nor will I ever betray My faithfulness.” God says, “When Israel is disobedient, I will discipline them because they are My children; but I will never stop loving them. I will never violate My covenant with them.” So, Israel is a shining example of God’s faithfulness even when Israel was unfaithful. God never breaks a promise. In Romans 11:7-10 Paul says that Israel was and is being disciplined. But the first thing that God says is that the setting aside of Israel is partial, not complete.

**II. The second thing He says in verses 11-36 is that the setting aside of Israel is only TEMPORARY, not PERMANENT.** Look at what Paul says in verse 11, “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? No at all!” He says, “They’ve stumbled, but they haven’t fallen.” Stumbling is temporary; but a fall is permanent. So God says, “I have not permanently set aside My people.”

Why were they set aside? Well, God had several reasons for setting them aside (verses 11-16).

(i) Paul says, “Rather because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles...” The first reasons therefore, why God set aside Israel was so that the Gentiles could be saved. Look at Acts 13:46, “Then Paul and Barnabas answered (the Jews) boldly, “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us — ‘I have made you (Paul and Barnabas) a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” So that was the first reason.

(ii) The second reason was in order to make Israel envious. In the Acts of the Apostles the author several times mentions Jewish envy of the apostles. The Jews were undoubtedly jealous of the success of those early Christians, of the large crowds they attracted, and of their influence on the people. But Paul has a deeper and better reason for their envy. He knew that when Israel would see the blessings of salvation being enjoyed by believing Gentiles — their reconciliation to God and to each other, their assurance of having their sins forgiven, their love and joy and peace through the Holy Spirit — they would covet these blessings for themselves, and, it is implied, would repent and believe in Jesus in order to secure eternal life. Thus, being provoked to envy, they would be led to salvation.

(iii) Now in the third place they were set aside in order that a new channel of blessing might be opened to the whole world. Look at verse 12 in the Living Bible translation, “Now if the whole world became rich as a result of God’s offer of salvation, when the Jews stumbled over it and turned it down, think how much greater a blessing the world will share in later on when the Jews, too, come to Christ.” This simply means that if God is bringing this much good to the world when the Jews are still rejecting their Messiah, when they come back, what an untold blessing that will bring to all people everywhere!

According to the Old Testament, the Jews, as missionaries to the world, were called by God to do six things —

- Proclaim the existence of God to everyone;
- Reveal the truth concerning the coming Messiah;
- Preserve and transmit the sacred Scriptures;
- Show forth the faithfulness of God;
- Show to the world the blessedness of serving God; and
- Reveal to the world God’s grace in dealing with sin.

These were the six dominant themes of the Old Testament. But Israel didn’t do these things.

The Book of Jonah is a typical example of a prevailing attitude amongst the Jews. According to the narrative, God told the prophet Jonah to go and preach to the Ninevites. Nineveh was a city in modern Syria. God said, “Jonah, I want you to go to these people who are the enemies of Israel because I’m going to save them through your preaching!” Jonah’s immediate reply was, “No way! God, I don’t want You to save our enemies.” There’s grim humor in the story because God told Jonah to go east to Nineveh, and what did Jonah do? He boarded a ship for Tarshish, a port in Spain, as far West as he could go! So, God intervened, and Jonah took a three-day Mediterranean cruise, all expenses paid, inside a big fish! However, he learned his lesson and finally arrived at Nineveh. He preached; the people repented; and God sent a great revival. And how did Jonah respond? He was madder than a wet hen! “God, why did You have to save those creeps?” And that attitude was the exact opposite of what God had told the Jews to do.

So, God created a new channel for world evangelism — the Church of Jesus Christ. But God has not given up on the nation of Israel. Look at verse 16 — “If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.” What does that mean? Well, Paul is referring to the passage in Numbers (15:17-21) where it says that when women made bread, they were to take the first part of the dough and give it to the Lord as a tithe, and that would make the whole loaf holy. So, Paul infers, when the first Jewish converts believed on Christ, the conversion of the rest can be expected to follow. Again, when Paul says, “If the root is holy, so are the branches,” he is really saying that as the Jewish patriarchs belonged to God because of their covenant relationship to Him, so do their descendants who are included in the covenant.

So, this “root and branches” picture leads Paul now to develop his allegory of the olive tree. And that brings us to our next question, namely,

- What should be our attitude to Israel right now? Paul, in this next section, warns Gentiles not to become prideful, and he says in effect, “You people don’t have anything to boast about. Yes, I have set aside the nation of Israel for the time being”; and he uses the illustration of an olive tree. Now the olive tree is a symbol of the nation of Israel to this day. In the Garden of Gethsemane, they show you olive trees that were there in the time of our Lord.

Now olive trees have to be cultivated for them to produce. And Paul says in verse 17, “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.”

He’s saying, “Our heritage as Christians came from the Jews! God had the olive tree; it wasn’t producing fruit; so He lopped off some of the branches, not all of them, but some of them; and He took us, those wild olive trees, and He grafted branches of them into the stock of Israel. And a true Jew is anyone who believes in Jesus. But don’t become proud — it’s all of God’s grace alone.”

In verse 21 he says, “Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either.” Now don’t misunderstand this. He’s not talking here about losing your salvation. The fact is he’s not talking about individuals here; he’s talking about the nation of Israel, and he’s saying, “The nation of Israel did not follow Me the way I wanted them to, so I set them aside. So, don’t become proud, because the same thing could happen to you.” You see, God will bless any nation that honors Him. But don’t say that Britain or America is the chosen nation. As long as a nation has godly people who follow the Lord, then God will bless that nation.

Now look at verse 23, “And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. (He’s talking about Israel.) After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches (the Jews) be grafted into their own olive tree!” At any point in time God could graft the Jews right back in, and they would grow and flourish!

This illustration of the olive tree shows clearly how complete, in Paul’s thought, was the continuity between the Christian Church and the Israel of the Old Testament. The Church is not a new society; it is “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16); it is the old stock of Abraham — since Christ is the destined offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), and Christians have been grafted into Christ.

So, Paul is saying that the rejection of Israel is temporary, not permanent, and that although Israel has hardened its heart right now, there is hope. Indeed, there are many believing Jews in the Church right now, “completed” Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Messiah.

- Now the next question is — How long is this setting aside going to last? Look at verse 25, “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, so that you may not be conceited.

Israel has experienced a hardening in part (not total) until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” How long *is* Israel going to be set aside? Until all of the Gentiles who are to become believers, have come into the family of God. God knows the exact number of people who are going to be saved; and when they are in, then God will bring Israel back in. But, of course, many Jews are believers already.

- Now what is ultimately going to happen? Look at verse 26, “And so all Israel will be saved.” I believe that phrase means “the total number of the elect, both Jews and Gentiles”; “the Israel of God,” including the great majority of Jews of the final generation before the return of Christ. The salvation of the Jews will, of course, be on the same basis as anyone else’s salvation: Personal faith in Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead.

A magnificent verse is found in Zechariah 12:10 — this is a prophecy of what is going to happen; and we’re beginning to see it happen already as God is beginning to gather Israel as a nation back together. “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on Me, the One they have pierced (Jesus!).” The prophet is talking about the Jews coming back to Christ, the One they crucified. There is coming a time when there will be a major turning around in the nation of Israel. That is what Ezekiel 37 is all about — the story of the dry bones being clothed with flesh and coming back to life — a parable of Israel’s restoration.

### **III. And then in verses 33-36 Paul just explodes in thanksgiving for God’s faithfulness.**

You can feel the excitement in his heart. And with this glorious paean of praise he ends the chapter, and this second main section of his letter; assuring us in the most vigorous terms that when God makes promises, He always keeps them!

### **IV. Now, in conclusion, let us make a personal application and see how God’s faithfulness relates to my life; and what it means to me personally.** Let’s look at seven things you can count on because of the faithfulness of God.

a. Hebrews 10:23. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He Who promised is faithful. The first thing you can count on is that God will always keep His promises to you.

b. 2 Timothy 2:13. “If we are faithless, He will remain faithful, for He cannot disown Himself.” That means that even if we are unfaithful to Him, He will remain faithful to us because once we are His, He cannot disown Himself. So, this verse tells us that we can count on God to keep us saved. Aren’t you glad salvation is by grace, and not by your works? Because if it were by your works, the moment you stopped working, you’d lose it.

c. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. “May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One Who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.” This simply means that God can be counted on to keep you growing to maintain in you the process of sanctification making you more and more like Jesus. What God begins, He finishes.

d. 2 Thessalonians 3:3. “But the Lord is faithful and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.” Isn’t that great?! We can count on God to protect us from the attacks of Satan.

e. 1 Corinthians 10:13. Here we are given a fantastic promise — “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” Because God is faithful He can be counted on to help me when I’m tempted. The Christian who says, “Hey, I couldn’t help myself,” is stating what is not true. God is faithful, and He will help you overcome that temptation. But what if you still give in? Then cling to,

f. 1 John 1:9. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. So, God can be counted on to forgive all our sins. And then finally,

g. 1 Peter 4:19. “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will...” Folks, sometimes suffering is in the will of God. I resent those people who say, “If you have an illness, then you are out of the will of God. If you are sick, it’s because you don’t have enough faith.” But this verse assures us that God can use suffering in our lives. Indeed, He often uses it to build character in us. What should people do who suffer according to God’s will? They should “commit themselves to their faithful Creator, and continue to do good.” So, because God is faithful, I can count on Him to support me in suffering. In fact, that is often the time when we learn most about God’s faithfulness — when we’re going through tough times. Someone has said that a friend is someone who walks in when everybody else walks out; and God is always a Friend to His children. He is always faithful to His chosen people, and to us!

**AMEN.**