

God's Plan for Israel

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder what you, if you're in Zoom, what you were talking about in regards to that question, or if you're by yourself at home, what you were thinking to that question. Why is everyone so interested in Israel?

And I've got it at the top of my outline as well, which you can pick up off the website if you're interested to follow along. Have you ever wondered, then, why there's so much interest in the affairs of Israel and the Middle East?

Now, sure, in part, there's been a decades-long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. But why is the rest of the world and the superpowers so invested in the outcome of this tiny strip, over this tiny strip of land?

And I've got a slide for you on the next slide. Yep. If you can't see it, there's a reason why. It's tiny, isn't it? It had to be circled out for you to be able to see it.

And it's got very little natural resources, like oil. It's not a strategic location, like the Suez Canal, which is just west of it, or the Persian Gulf. And yet, it seems that this has always been the case.

[1 : 15] And I think it's very much to do with the fact that since the Roman Empire turned to Christendom, Christians believe Israel has a special place in God's plan. And so, in the Middle Ages, Christian kings and princes and knights from Europe came to Palestine to defend Jerusalem for God.

And after the Holocaust, when the Jews were given a homeland in 1948, which is where the nation of Israel now is, many Christians saw that as the beginning of God's fulfillment of his Old Testament promises.

I remember being a boy living in Singapore, how there was much hype in the church about trying to interpret current world events in the light of Old Testament prophecies relating to Israel.

Now, that has waned somewhat now. And tonight's sermon isn't focused on it at all, so much. But you can see, can't you, why there's so much interest in Israel.

And that's been Paul's interest over the last few weeks as well. It's been ticking away in the background over chapters 9 and 10. But now in chapter 11 and verse 1, Paul tackles this question directly.

[2 : 31] He's asking, in the light of the coming of Jesus, what about the fate of Israel? Has God rejected Israel? Now, for Paul, this isn't just a sentimental question.

Yes, Paul loved his people. He wanted to see them saved. But something more important was at stake. Because if God could be accused of forsaking Israel, then what's to say he wouldn't do it again with Christians, with the New Testament and the promises in it?

If God could renege on his promises to Israel, then what assurances do Christians have that our promises in Christ wouldn't be taken from us?

And so, even though you might be a Gentile today, this question of the fate of Israel actually concerns you as well. Because it concerns the faithfulness of God and his promises.

Well, Paul answers this first point by firstly pointing to himself in verse 1. He says, I asked then, did God reject his people? By no means.

[3 : 36] I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin. Paul is proved positive that God didn't reject his people. Paul was a late convert to Christianity, but as a Jew, he's now a recipient of God's blessing through Christ.

Paul goes on to say, God's promise to Israel has never encompassed every single Israelite anyway. Instead, it's been based on God's grace from the very start.

Those God foreknew, he chose right before they'd done anything to deserve it. And so he goes on, verse 2, God did not reject his people whom he foreknew. Don't you know what scripture, that is the Old Testament, says in the passage about Elijah?

How he appealed to God against Israel. 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 bow. So too, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works.

[4 : 44] If it were, grace would no longer be grace. The point Paul makes here is similar to chapter 9, two weeks ago, that first, people choose to obey God only because God has first chosen them.

The 7,000 during Elijah's time didn't bow to bow only because God reserved them for himself. They were chosen by grace, just like now, not because of works.

But also, the fact of choosing means not all are chosen. So God's promises to Israel never meant all Israelites were chosen.

But just as Andrew has been saying, and consistent with chapter 10, those who are not chosen or elected also harden their hearts as a result.

They themselves choose to reject God. So verse 7, What then, what the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain, the elect among them did, but the others were hardened, as it is written, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear.

[5 : 56] To this very day, when David says, And so to repeat what Andrew has been saying over the last two weeks, both are true.

God is sovereign in who he chooses. He lacks and he hardens. But as a result, the people choose to disobey their own sin and snares them and blinds them to God's grace.

But none of these invalidates God's promises. It's always been like that throughout Israel's history. If you look back at the Old Testament, many of Abraham's descendants perished despite God's promises to them as a whole.

And these quotations we just read come from the Old Testament. In the books of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and the Psalms, all of them show that what God had planned from the very beginning was that even as God had promised to bless Israel, he also promised at the very same time that some will reject him.

So has God rejected his people? No, because some of his people have chosen to reject him. And that's because God has not chosen them.

[7 : 21] Let that sink in for a moment because that applies to us as a church as well. We only believe, we only come to faith because God first has taken the initiative with us to call us to himself.

But moving on to verse 11, Paul now asks a further question. Again I ask, did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?

Not at all. Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring?

And so Paul here answers the question about whether God has rejected Israel for good. And the answer is no. But in the process, God is revealing something of God's big plan here.

And the first step of which is revealed here now by Paul. God will cause Israel to transgress or sin in order for salvation to come to the Gentiles.

[8 : 30] You see, it's because the first disciples were persecuted at the very start by the Jews in Jerusalem, particularly by the chief priests, that actually the gospel has spread to the Gentiles across the Roman Empire.

And Paul would know this firsthand because he was chief prosecutor number one of the disciples. But as the followers of Jesus were scattered and they came to a new city, what they would do is first preach the gospel to the Jews.

But after the Jews rejected it, they would then turn to the Gentiles. And Paul himself, after he became a Christian and became a missionary, he experienced the very same thing.

And as he preached to the Gentiles, he saw how many of them turned to Christ because God had called and chosen them. Now, had the Jews responded positively to the gospel in the first place in Jerusalem, then there may not be that urgent need to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

It's a bit like the skills shortage in the Australian economy. If we didn't have a skills shortage in certain things, then businesses wouldn't be looking overseas, would they, to attract migrants?

[9 : 45] The migrant program wouldn't have special preferences given to people for IT skills, let's say, or, as I gather, hairdressing. Being a barber, apparently, is in short supply.

So the rejection of the gospel by the Jews pushed the early church to preach to the Gentiles by necessity. But it was actually part of God's original plan all along anyway.

He had longed to bring the Gentiles into his kingdom by these means, and he had prophesied long ago that this would occur. But the hardening of Israel's heart initially, God intends as well to make Israel envious.

That is, God intends to harden their hearts so that when they look at the Gentiles and see how they've been blessed by God, they would be envious of missing out on the blessing.

Now, you may be surprised to hear that God would do such a thing, but Paul is now about to explain why. And we must appreciate just how provocative this choosing of the Gentiles is to the Israelites.

[11 : 01] It's like washing your parents, not buying gifts for your birthday, but then instead lavishing presents on other children as they wander past your house. It would make you think, hey, Dad, what about me?

Am I not your child? Am I not your favorite child? But of course, Israel too was responsible, weren't they? They rejected God by rejecting his son Jesus.

So it's not like they were innocent, but they were actually implicated in their own rejection. But Paul says, look at this from God's perspective too, because if for a time Israel's rejection of him leads to this riches flowing to the Gentiles, and then afterwards, if he then called the Jews to return to the fold, how wonderful would that be, that he'll have within his kingdom both Jews and Gentiles, part of his big plan all along.

And so that's what Paul hopes for from verse 13. He hopes that Israel will indeed be provoked by envy to turn back to God through Jesus.

I'm talking to you Gentiles. In as much as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and to save some of them.

[12 : 22] For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the door offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy.

If the root is holy, so are the branches. Now this last bit in verse 16 may be a little tricky to disciple, but I think what Paul is saying here is that if the initial batch or door or the root is holy, then so is the rest from it which is taken or from which it grows out of.

And so what is this initial batch? Well, I think it's the patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the original recipients of the promises. And holy here doesn't mean they were sinless or even that they were elected and saved.

Rather, it means that they were set apart originally for God's favor. And so collectively, it meant God's promises to the patriarchs were also meant for the rest of Israel by right of human descent.

This doesn't mean, of course, that some or many of these branches can't be broken off. It merely means they stood originally in line to inherit them.

[13 : 35] Now imagine queuing all night in the cold for grand final tickets. And come the morning, one hour before ticketing opens, and you know that you've been given your place in the queue and that because of that you're in a good chance to get a ticket.

And then what happens is that 15 minutes before the start of the sale, in comes 10 full coach loads of fans from the opposing team, and they're ushered to the start of the queue without explanation.

How would that make you feel? Well, that's the same feeling I think Paul says the Jews will have. They may not yet know this because they don't see that their only way to God is through Jesus, but when they realize that the Gentiles are claiming all these blessings for themselves is actually happening, and they were doing it at their expense, that the promises for Abraham were now being given to the Gentiles instead of to them as the Jews, they would be provoked to envy.

That, Paul says, is precisely God's intent. He wants to draw Israel back to himself by having them see the Gentiles basking in God's riches and mercy.

But if that's God's plan, then it must mean that God hasn't rejected Israel for good, surely. And so now before Paul goes on to finish his argument, he pauses for a moment and turns to the Gentiles who are reading this in church.

[15 : 15] You see, throughout this letter, he's been addressing Christians in Rome, but now he's speaking specifically to the Gentiles among them. In fact, as you saw in verse 13, he's already started addressing them specifically there, but now he makes his point to them.

He says, God may well intend for Israel to look at the Gentile Christians and be provoked to envy and therefore repentance, but don't think you Gentile Christians can then look down on them in pride because you have nothing, we have nothing, to brag about in our salvation.

It is purely by faith, Paul says. And if God is doing this to Israel because of their unbelief, then surely he can do that to the Gentiles too, if they resort to unbelief as well.

In fact, Paul says he would have no hesitation doing it, for the Gentile Christians are wild branches grafted in. We're never given these promises by heritage, but only through Jesus, by grace.

Instead, for Israel, the moment they no longer persisted in unbelief and saw Jesus as their Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises to them and believe, God would have no hesitation of grafting them back in, in a heartbeat.

[17 : 38] Why? Because that's the kindness of God. That's his character, to be compassionate, slow to anger, quick to forgive, even when his people do sin time and time again.

And that's the picture we get as we read that first Old Testament reading in Hosea chapter 11. He's there longing, wasn't he, for Israel, his firstborn, to return to him.

There's a picture of God's tenderness even to a wayward son, he says, how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I give you up, Israel? He's like the father that Jesus talks about, waiting for the prodigal son to return, and he will run out to meet Israel the moment that he returns.

So Paul says instead of the Gentiles Christians looking down in arrogance on the Israelites, look up instead.

Look up to God and his kindness. For God has applied the same kindness and mercy to us unworthy Gentiles as well.

[18 : 48] In fact, he even hardened for a time the hearts of his chosen people in order that the lives of the unchosen, as it were, could be saved.

And so what we find in verses 25 to 32 is a summary of this grand plan to God. I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, that's how Paul talks about the plan, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited, full of pride.

Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number 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 turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins. As far as the gospel is concerned, there are enemies for your sake.

But as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs. For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God, just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so too they have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you.

[20 : 07] For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. Now, there are a couple of tricky bits here.

And I think the most tricky bit is the one in verse 26 where Paul says all Israel will be saved. And people have asked, what does that mean?

Well, I think some people see it as all Israel as being the church. That's the church being spiritual Israel. And all of Christ's body as the successor of Israel.

Now, it's true that that is what happens in the New Testament, that the church is now the true Israel or the fulfillment or the type of Israel.

Israel. And yet, I think because Paul's logic and consistent distinction throughout this whole passage has been between Israel and the Gentiles, I can't see how that could be the interpretation.

[21 : 08] Otherwise, all his argumentation would make no sense. So I believe here that Israel must mean ethnic Israel in some sense. The question then is, in what sense?

Is it the modern nation of Israel? Well, perhaps, but there are many Israeli citizens of the nation now that are Arabs and non-Jews.

So I'm not sure it's the political Israel. Others think maybe it's all the Jews that's around the world, those who are truly descended from Jacob.

Again, that's a possibility. But there are also ethnic Jews now who are Christians, and some of you might know them, people like Paul. And so this idea of all Israel must somehow encompass something more comprehensive, not just individual Jews coming to faith in Jesus, but sort of a corporate Israel, isn't it?

And so maybe it's the mass conversion of Judaism, that official religion of the Jews acknowledging Jesus as Messiah. It perhaps may not mean that they would necessarily become Christians, but as we've already seen with some Jews, that they profess then to be Messianic Jews, that is, Jews who see in Jesus as their Messiah.

[22 : 31] So there are various permutations, but the reality is that we're really only guessing, aren't we? And no one knows for sure. And no one, I think, can know for sure. All I know is that something wonderful will happen because of what Paul describes here.

And when it does, people will look back, and they will marvel and see just how it is, as it says in verse 29, that God's gifts and call are indeed irrevocable.

It's a bit like Jesus is coming. Before it happened, nobody could work out how it could occur. All these Old Testament promises were simply vague notions of how God might fulfill them.

But then Jesus comes, and with the benefit of hindsight and with the Spirit's illumination, all of it makes sense to us now, doesn't it? But up to that point, when Jesus came, it was inscrutable.

We could only guess. We only had shadows of it. And so I think with the fate of Israel, that's probably what's going to happen. We will look back when it happens and go, of course, God.

[23 : 44] Why couldn't we see that? How marvelous was your plan? But as it is now, all we know is that the reason why God hardened Israel initially is so that God's mercy can be shown to the Gentiles.

It can be shown to the Gentiles through Israel's disobedience. And Paul says, you Gentiles who were once disobedient have received mercy as a result of Israel's disobedience.

But just as it happened to us Gentiles, so too Israel will receive mercy from God, but after they have first been shown themselves of their own disobedience.

You see, God puts them in the same position, doesn't he, as the Gentiles. All of us, whether Jews who first had the promise or the Gentiles who are grafted in, all are saved only because of God's mercy.

If God had not hardened the Jews' heart, they might have thought, oh, we deserve this. But no, because their hearts were hardened, they were brought back down in humility, recognizing that just like the Gentiles, they're only being received by God on the basis of mercy.

[25 : 02] And so, verse 32, for God has bound everyone, Jew or Gentile, over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. There is no boasting in our own merit, no boasting in our heritage for the Jews, only humble thankfulness that God has shown his mercy to us all.

And that is the way with each and every one of us, whether we're Jew or Gentile. The only way to God is through humble recognition of our own failure and inability to earn God's favor.

Pride is the thing that hardens our heart against God. And if ever we see it welling in us, if ever we, you know, if ever someone said to you, you need to repent and you start thinking self-righteously that you don't, well, that's the act of hardening, isn't it?

Of course, I'm not saying that you just admit to everything as though, no, but every time we said that we've done something wrong, that is an opportunity, isn't it, to search our hearts. And even if we are right to realize that, you know, we do not find favor before God because we're right or we've done the right thing, but only because of God's grace and mercy to us.

And so if you ever feel that tinge of self-righteousness, of achievements of your salvation coming because of your works or your good deeds, then that would be a good time to confess it at once before it solidifies into hardness of heart in your life.

[26 : 36] And I have to say it can happen to anyone, particularly religious people actually, who have lived a moral life for a while. God's consistent pattern, which we see in his dealing with Israel and which applies to all of us, is that the hardening of pride cuts us off from him and cuts us off from the grace that we receive in his son.

You see, not every Jewish person, even though chosen as part of Israel, are grafted back in, much less a Gentile having that same claim.

So there's a warning in this for all of us, isn't it? That even if we are a Christian now, not to give in to self-righteousness, not to harden our hearts.

Instead, marvel at God's kindness and sternness. Marvel at the way he uses our own disobedience to bring us to a point of seeing the riches of his grace and mercy.

And as we see that, give praise, as Paul now does in the very final verses, to the depths and riches of God's wonderful and inscrutable plan.

[27 : 50] And so that's where Paul ends, doesn't he? He finishes his argument, but he can't help himself but praise God. He's tried to explain as much as he can how much of God that has been revealed to him he's revealed to us.

But afterwards, all that's left for him to do is stand in awe of God's wonder, stand in awe of God's great plan of salvation, both for the Jews and the Gentiles.

And so he concludes like this, Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? who has ever given to God that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen. Amen.