

God and Israel

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Date: 31 July 2022

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- [0 : 00] Morning everyone, great to be here. Keep your Bibles open there at Romans 11. Got a question for you to kick off with. When can a circle ever be a triangle?
- There we go. Discuss that. I'll give you 30 seconds. Is there any mathematicians in the room? I don't mean to explode your brain right now. When can a circle ever be a triangle?
- The actual technical answer is never. Never.
- They are two very two-dimensional shapes. There is no way possible to actually make a circle into a triangle without it losing its circle-ness.
- If you go and look up the definition of what a circle is and what a triangle is, it's not possible for either one of them to be made into the other without it losing its original identity and purpose.
- [1 : 14] However, the two shapes can come together in such a way to create a three-dimensional object where you see a circle, you see a triangle, but it's actually a cone.
- And it will depend on which angle you are looking at it as to what you actually see. Two individual shapes, 2D shapes, can come together and make a more complex 3D shape.
- And depending on which way you look at it, you'll see one thing or you'll see the other. And such is the complexity of God's sovereignty and human responsibility working together.
- It is a complex issue. And in debating these matters over the centuries, it's not unusual to push either God's sovereignty or human responsibility to such a point that they lose their shape.
- Rather than holding them, as the Bible does, in balance together. God chooses those he will save through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ.
- [2 : 29] We are responsible for our rejection of him and the good news of Jesus Christ. The Bible declares that they are both true. The circle and the triangle, but they're actually working together.
- 100% true. Not 50%, 50%, not 75% or 95% and 5%. Both are 100% true at exactly the same time.
- It's God's mathematics, not Wikipedia's or mine, yours. Or to quote John Stott from his Romans commentary, if anybody is lost, the blame is theirs.
- But if anybody is saved, the credit is God's. This contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve, but it is consistent with scripture, history and experience.
- It is a mystery. And in attempting to remove the mystery over the centuries, people have wandered into heresy on multiple occasions.
- [3 : 37] So the Jews, as we've been reading, God's historic people are responsible for their refusal to put their trust in Jesus Christ.
- And they have not come to faith because God has not chosen to have mercy on them. They're both true. That's a summary of chapters 9 to 10, as we have so far read in Romans.

So now we're up to chapter 11. And Paul is still wrestling with this big idea of whether God has rejected his historic people. The central argument in this chapter is God has not rejected his people, Israel, because the books are still open.

And there is still an opportunity for them to embrace Jesus as their Lord and their Saviour. And therefore, the books are still open for us this morning as we gather here in person or online.

There is still an opportunity. So I've got three things to say, the trustworthy God, the saving God, and the praiseworthy God, if you're someone who likes to take notes. Chapter 11 opens with a familiar question of whether God has rejected his people, Israel, and the short answer is no, then a long explanation.

[4 : 58] And Paul, in the first number of verses, gives four arguments as to back up the short answer. And the first is the Paul argument in verse 1.

That is, Paul himself is a Jew who's come to faith in Jesus Christ. This blasphemous Christian persecuting Paul is a Jew who God has not given up on.

And he's now being used by God to multiply his gospel work. The second argument is in verse 2, the election argument. Paul is saying that God has determined, he has foreordained to bring Jews to faith in him.

Those he has chosen will not fail to believe. The third argument, verses 2 and 4, 2 to 4 is the Elijah argument. It's a historical argument. 1 Corinthians, sorry, 1 Kings 19.

We read that Elijah thought that God had abandoned his people too, had rejected them, and he was the only one left. And yet, as we find out in the chapter, there are many left.

[6 : 07] And there has always been a faithful remnant amongst God's historical people who have trusted by grace. The fourth argument is in verses 5 and 6, and that's the grace argument.

What guarantees that there will always be a faithful remnant is not that there will always be a group, a group of good people amongst God's historic people, a group of smart people amongst God's historic people who believe, but because God is always gracious.

Then in verse 7, Paul takes us back to his point in chapter 9, verse 6, where he says, for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.

So in verse 7, he makes the point, it is not God who has rejected his people, but it's his people who have rejected him.

Have a look at it with me. What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly, they did not obtain.

[7 : 26] The elect among them, the elect among them did, but the others were hardened. And last week in chapter 10, verse 3, we read that Israel did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own.

So Paul tells us here that they sought righteousness earnestly.

God's historic people sought a right relationship with God earnestly. They earnestly pursued it. A right standing, a right relationship with God, but they did it on their terms.

Instead of receiving a right relationship with God as a gift through Jesus Christ, they attempted to establish their own, to work for it themselves.

Israel earnestly sought a right relationship with God, but they did it the wrong way. And that is the case for all of them, except for those that God had chosen.

[8 : 40] And as a result, most of God's historic people were hardened. And the hardening here, just to remind us of the last couple of weeks, is a legal punishment for having a proud heart that rejects the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

In verse 8, Paul again quotes from the Old Testament to show us how it has been, always been.

And what Paul's doing here, is he quoting Isaiah. And Isaiah himself is quoting Moses. That is, what we have here is both Paul in the New Testament is quoting the law and the prophets.

And Paul is saying, Moses warned Israel in his day that their rebellion resulted in God giving them a spiritual blindness.

Isaiah in his day told Israel that he had continued through their history a spiritual blindness because they pursued righteousness on their terms.

[9 : 53] And now, the apostle Paul is telling the Roman church it's happening again. Right through history, the pursuit of righteousness on our own terms.

And so, in verses 9 and 10, we have this spiritual blindness is a retribution. It's a punishment that exactly fits the crime.

Hardening is a fitting punishment for a proud heart. You see, pride and self-centeredness lead to hardness and lovelessness.

Rejection of God leads to rejection from God. It's a just punishment. But these verses are quite confronting.

The very people who had earnestly, diligently, zealously sought a relationship with God were the same people who rejected his love for them.

[11 : 10] It's an amazing dynamic. And the amazing dynamic is that a person can try so desperately hard to please God with all of their life, to serve him with all of their life, and end up resisting the very idea of God's mercy on their life.

And you find that an incredible dynamic. most people who believe in God conclude that God is transcendent.

You don't have to be Christian to do this. They believe that God is transcendent, that he's powerful, that he's good in some kind of way. And therefore, the assumption with human wisdom is that we need to approach this God, we need to appease this God in some kind of way.

And I need to improve myself. in some kind of way in order to appease this God. And such people generally find any concept of free, total, unconditional acceptance dishonouring to God.

You may have thought it yourself. you may have even heard someone say something like the idea that a convicted murderer could just say words of repentance and be right with God, just like the good religious person who's volunteered themselves in the, you know, the local hospital all of their life, like as if somehow it's a level playing field for all people.

[12 : 56] people, that's just illogical. How insulting to my life of good deeds.

How insulting to common decency. How insulting to God. And yet the Christian gospel, the core of the Christian faith is in fact an assault on our religious works.

It appears in fact on one level to be assault on good character and on God. Through a real desire to please God mixed with a deep pride and a self-confidence the human heart becomes vaccinated against and hatred towards in fact the mercy and the love of God through Jesus Christ.

That is the normal human condition. We like to bring God down and elevate ourselves up.

And that's the case with so many religious people. Where a right standing with God is seriously and earnestly sought. Seriously and earnestly sought.

[14 : 21] And yet at the same time his loving offer of that right standing as a free gift is rejected. It may even describe you right now where you're sitting right now in this room or on screen tuning in.

Christian faith motivated almost completely by fear by guilt or a need for approval.

If anything else that Romans has taught us now is the time to lay that down. Now is the time to surrender your heart to Christ.

now is the time to confess a heart that is not humbled. A heart that is proud that set itself up ultimately against God's grace and his mercy.

Do it today. Come to Jesus. Jesus. So the majority of Israel has rejected God.

[15 : 30] Historic Israel. Ethnic Israel has rejected God. So is that it? Is that the end of the story? Are they now beyond salvation? That's the essence of the question from verse 11 onwards.

Again, Paul again gives a definitive no and then goes on for an explanation. Then he outlines three stages of God's plan of salvation for Israel.

The first stage is the stage that Paul himself is currently in and that is one of hostility to the Christian message. Yes, he says, many early Jews believed but the majority have rejected.

Majority have rejected the Christian faith, rejected Jesus as their Messiah. And if this rejection, he says, had not happened, the early Christian Jews could have easily concluded that the gospel was only for ethnic Israel.

No need for the Gentile world to know of this. And you see this happening in the book of Acts. Gospel is preached, first of all, to a synagogue.

[16 : 50] The Jewish community is fractured with some believing, some are hostile. Those who come to faith then go to the Gentiles to see them embracing the Christian faith. And as a result, the early church, right from its inception, is a multi-ethnic church.

This leads to stage two. As they see the church growing and Gentiles coming to faith, in verse 11, we are told, these Gentile converts make Israel envious.

Paul repeats it himself in verse 14. 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.

Now, we normally would think of envy in a negative sense, which as a general rule, it is. But I think that John Stott, writing in his Romans commentary, captures here Paul's thinking in a much better way, where he writes, not all envy is tainted with selfishness because it is not always either a grudging discontent or a sinful covetousness.

At base, envy is the desire to have for oneself something possessed by another. And whether envy is good or evil depends on the nature of the something desired and on whether one has a right of its possession.

[18 : 29] If that something is in itself evil or it belongs to somebody else and we have no right to it, then the envy is sinful.

But if the something desired is in itself good, a blessing from God, which he means all people to enjoy, then to covet it and to envy those who have it is not at all unworthy.

This kind of desire is right in itself and to arouse it can be a realistic motive for ministry. I think that's a great explanation of what Paul's trying to do here.

God's historic people will see many of God's historic promises to them being fulfilled in the Gentiles and that will prompt them to want to believe it.

Here's the remarkable thing about God's plan. Just as the Gentiles could only have heard the gospel because Israel had largely rejected Jesus, now the Jews can only believe because those who accepted Jesus were largely Gentiles.

[19 : 55] Paul then writes that the third and the final stage of blessings for the Jews is sometime in the future. in verse 12, he seems to have a vision of a significant number of them coming to faith in Jesus Christ which we see again at the end of the chapter.

If their unbelieving has had a remarkable benefit, imagine the benefit of their believing in Jesus. Jesus. In verses 17 to 24, Paul uses an olive tree as an illustration if you like to bring clarity on how God's salvation plan works.

And this is also a warning to the Gentile Christians that are there. Verse 17, if some of the branches have been taken off and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap of the olive root.

Now, to get what he's saying here, there's a bit of a horticultural lesson to understand what he's getting at. And who better to understand a horticultural lesson but to turn to a Scottish New Testament scholar, William Ramsey, he writes in his commentary, in exceptional circumstances, it is customary to reinvigorate an olive tree which is ceasing to bear fruit by grafting into it a shoot of a wild olive tree so that the sap of the tree enables, ennobles, enables, this wild shoot to in fact grow while at the same time encouraging the original olive tree to bear fruit.

This wild olive branch is a dynamic and a growing thing in and of itself but it can draw and produce life only because it is grafted into an olive tree because it's there, it draws the nourishment, it needs full life and at the same time that that's happening, the presence of the wild olive branch renews the original olive tree in such a way that it's invigorated and it starts again to bear fruit.

[22 : 51] Verse 13 tells us that Paul is applying that metaphor specifically to the Gentiles. They are the wild olive shoots, they've been grafted into God's historic people and all its promises.

the Gentiles are being grafted in so that they might be nourished by the giving gospel of justification by faith which has always been the faith of God's historic people ever since Abraham right through.

They've now been included in justification by faith and so the lesson here for the Gentile believers are growing humility.

You're not smarter than they are. You've not seen something or got softer hearts. The Gentiles must not boast.

Verse 18 Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do consider this you do not support the root but the root supports you.

[24 : 05] You will say then branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in granted but they were broken off because of unbelief and you stand by faith.

Do not be arrogant but tremble for if God did not spare the natural branches he will not spare you never and so a genuine response to the good news of the gospel is a reverent fear.

Verse 22 calls us to meditate on the kindness and the sternness of God that is justification by faith God's grace to us through his sovereignty ought never ever ever lead to presumption.

We see throughout Romans and the Bible the ongoing problem of presumption. We saw it in chapter 6 and 7 presumption God saves me he's sovereign I don't need to do anything presumption though Israel were God's chosen people they started to think they were the choice people they became confident that they were in no matter how they lived simply because Abraham was their father they became proud and looked down on others and Paul is calling these Gentile believers not to fall in the same presumption of historic Israel so again verse 22 consider therefore the kindness and the sternness of God sternness to those who fell but kindness to you provided that you continue in his kindness human responsibility work at it otherwise you too will be cut off the only way we know that God's sovereign love is upon us is that we continue we persevere in seeking to be like

Jesus until the day we meet Jesus it's not a circle or a triangle it's a cone if the continuing disappears we start living for ourselves and living sin and start to rely on our own performance our own theological heritage marriage we start relying upon those things for relationship with God then we will and we should begin to wonder if his kindness is still upon us if we have faith in Jesus Christ we can be assured and confident but we must never be arrogant and proud assured and confident but never arrogant and proud Paul closes off this section by revealing a great mystery it is designed to stop the

[27 : 26] Gentiles from being conceited when they look at the failure of ethnic Israel to embrace Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour in short Paul's language in writing about that mystery allows for the possibility of a steady but growing flow towards Jesus amongst his own historic people ethnic people and so he says here the Jewish unbelievers are to be viewed always with hope always with hope the Christian must say to themselves over and over again I disobeyed God I refuse to believe the gospel but now I'm a Christian I'm a child of God I'm an inheritor of all his historic promises to his people Israel I am here in part because the gospel reached beyond disbelieving

Israel and so if God can reach me even me in his mercy through a Jew and through their disobedience he can certainly reach them through his mercy and through my faith the mystery is that God uses the Jews to reach the Gentiles and the Gentiles to reach the Jews that in itself is a grounding for a multi ethnic church all people Jew and Gentile have been disobedient and are lost and yet all people found by God's mercy so if you're someone who takes notes maybe write this one down as a bit of a summary of 9 to 11

God's mercy does not come to all without exception but it does come to all without distinction God's mercy does not come to all without exception but it does come to all without distinction distinction this causes Paul to pause he has carried this idea of God's sovereignty and human responsibility to the edge as far as knowledge has taken him as far as revelation has taken him as far as God has wanted him to know he's gone to the edge of the earth sailed to the end and if there is more to know of God which there is God's chosen not to reveal it at this point and there's only one thing left to do and that is for a heart to be lifted a mind to be lifted and to overflow in praise of this

God the God of the wonderful of the mysterious as he draws this to a close recall God here in the first place don't forget at the end of chapter eight we have declaring that there is no in no uncertain terms whatsoever that God's promises to his to believers in Jesus Christ are absolutely rock solid you can be confident of your salvation in Jesus Christ nothing he says can separate us from Jesus God's word is true it is reliable it is consistent God's promises are always completed and fulfilled not one single bit falls to the ground God's chain of salvation as as Aidan said is unbreakable those who have been elect will be glorified and so we start beginning of chapter nine what about

Israel then you know has God failed them has God's plan of salvation failed that's the undercurrent of all of nine to eleven and that issue as I said at the beginning is a deeply personal issue for the Jewish Paul a deeply personal issue he is at the beginning of chapter nine in deep anguish about his people deep anguish this is not an intellectual exercise for him this is not a lecture room where we got an exam to complete at the end of this understanding God's sovereignty and human responsibility this is not a book that he's writing for distribution per se so that he can sell things this is a deeply personal issue he's in anguish in chapter nine and at the end of chapter 11 he just breaks out in spontaneous worship and there are things we can learn from these verses but

[33 : 10] I'm going to throw up four firstly there is no worship without truth Paul is quoting scripture as he praises God spontaneously in verse 34 he quotes from Isaiah 40 13 and in verse 35 he quotes from Job 41 verse 11 knowing scripture intimately makes an enormous difference both in the ignition of praise in the heart and in the expression of the praise that comes out of your mouth many books will teach meditation and spiritual techniques to centre on things like visualisations of incidences of one's past life or visualisation of phrases or images or even of nothing at all in fact there's a lot of meditation that says you got to get to a point where you don't visualise anything and just nothing worship of the creator

God the biblical is totally different than that worship should not come from meditation in general or of nothing in particular but through the meditation of scripture specifically the bible must always be the centre of any public or private praise and worship secondly there is no teaching there should be no teaching or study of truth without worship that's the point of the truth to look to the truth so that we see God and engage with him it's about communion with him Paul does not just teach or study truth without using it immediately as a basis for the praise of God he never treats truth as something just to be known something to be debated with something or even just to be applied but as a gateway into praise and so if you study great doctrines like

God's sovereignty and human responsibility and election and all that sort of stuff you study all of those things and never works over into worship for you you've totally missed the point of it all and it itself the fact that it never flows over to worship is in itself and I say this gently an indication of a hard heart now is the day for humility now is the day to confess that and to surrender to Christ the God you don't know fully Paul never treats truth just as something to be known or applied but as a gateway to praise of God we are never to study the Bible or to study God in a detached cool manner we must let ourselves be disturbed we must let ourselves to be confronted comforted and challenged by the truth we must always allow ourselves to feel its power thirdly truth that exalts

God leads to the greatest joy in life Paul does not find the deepest impulses for praise here by looking at human accomplishments praise comes to the degree that we see our weakness we see our impotence and our complete dependency upon God when we understand our smallness our limitation and his limitlessness and his bigness in other words the doctrines of God's complete sovereignty in salvation are what leads Paul here to the greatest joy and praise we have never given God anything he owes us nothing these are the ideas that well up in Paul in such a way that it overflows with worship and joy and lastly

Paul does not even get troubled by the parts of the Bible and God's ways that he cannot discern or figure out verse 33 is such a key verse here oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God how unsearchable his judgments in other words for us it's if you have not got to a point of mystery you've missed God how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out many people feel that they cannot get to the point of bowing the knee and surrendering to God and worshipping God unless they've understood everything about him Paul knew that was an impossibility without even studying theology just philosophically it's an impossibility it's an impossibility for the finite to know the infinite it's an impossibility for those who are time bound to understand timelessness you can't get your mind around it a

[38 : 58] God whose counsel we could fully grasp whose ways that we could fully discern whose nature we could fully explain would be no greater than your mind and by definition no longer divine because that divine being is all of a sudden limited it is not a cop out to call some things about God and his ways of mystery it's a point of praise and worship the God of the Bible is far bigger than you and me and so with Paul we actually don't need to be worried about that we don't need to be worried that we don't understand everything about him and his plan he has revealed enough for us to be confident in him he is reliable he is trustworthy he is merciful he is righteous we praise him for all that he has revealed and we praise him that there is so much more that he has not revealed we may not be able to understand everything about him and his ways but we are able to marvel at him and so we echo with the apostle

Paul in verse 36 to him be glory forever amen