

Guard your heart from unbelief

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[0 : 0 0] the Word of God there with you. Please turn again to Romans chapter 11. I know that it's a reasonably long chapter, but this is the third part of the same message that Paul began in chapter 9. Paul is on the same theme from the beginning of chapter 9 all the way through to the end of chapter 11, hence why it begins with a rhetorical question I ask then, has God rejected his people?

Well, he's following on what he said in chapter 10, and therefore he's following on what he said in chapter 9. Now, chapter 12 is a different kind of focus altogether. He moves on to what it is, how we are to live in the light of the grace of God, but the end of chapter 11 here raises for us lessons from the past. Now, these are lessons that the church need to learn for the simple reason that the sins of the past are also the sins of the present, and the dangers of the past are also the dangers of the present. You know, history is wrought with people who think that they won't make the same mistake as people in the past did because we're so much wiser now. The trouble is, is Solomon was the wisest man on earth, and yet the most stupidest at the same time. So, you've got to ask yourself the question, why is it the case that somebody can have so much wisdom and yet be so foolish? What's missing? Well, there's a key element that's missing, and that's the issue of relationship. Wisdom only works in a close relationship with God. This is why people can know the truth and yet still fail to do the right thing. That, that, why does that happen, and why does it happen a lot? Well, the answer is really, really simple. So, chapter 12 moves on to a different section, but chapter 11 finishes the section that Paul began all the way back in chapter 9. But if you put it into the context of the entire gospel, Romans 1 through to the very end of chapter 16, you've got to remember that Paul is writing this to a church in Rome. These are new believers, you know, Jews and Gentiles alike, and this is a message that both parties need to hear. And one of the issues that we have in chapter 11 here is that God does things very differently than the way we do things, and God does things very differently than the way that we think he should do things.

And that is somewhat problematic. It's problematic because we are supposed to understand and grow in the knowledge and wisdom of God. And then God tells us here that his ways are inscrutable, that his judgments are unsearchable. And that's just not to keep us guessing, but it's to show us how much more or how greater God is than us. God does everything in wisdom. Perhaps I can stress that for a moment.

I have what I have in my life because God in his wisdom decided to give it. Now, I don't have all the things that I should think I have in my life precisely because God has not given it. And God made that decision not to give in his wisdom. Now, we rally, we collide with the wisdom of God quite often, and here God's people have collided with God. So here's a summary. We become saved because the Jewish people, through their unbelief, were cut off. We have been grafted into the promises of God, which was always going to be that way, because the Jews, in their unbelief, were cut away. Now, before we move on to exactly what that means, you need to understand that God's people of old had every single promise as a blessing for them. So the question that raises itself now is, did the promise of God towards his own people fail? And if the answer to that is yes, then we have no hope and no security at all. Because the question we're going to be asking is, what if the promise of God fails towards us?

Right? If it failed towards them, will it not fail towards us? Well, Paul answers this really simply, no, it didn't fail towards you. And because it didn't fail towards them, it won't fail towards anybody. Rather, God made all these promises, the ultimate promise was Jesus Christ, but they rejected Jesus Christ. They were cut away because of their own unbelief, and we have been grafted in because we have been grafted in by faith. So the two issues here regarding all the promises is that people will be, even in the church, cut away, as Paul promises, because of their unbelief. Now, God has the power to graft people back in at his mercy, and only at his mercy. But this issue here is to highlight the sovereignty of God in all things. We love the security of once saved, always saved. The trouble is, the Bible doesn't teach that. What the Bible does teach is that when God saves you, he saves you forever. And you're going to say, well, you've said the same thing. I haven't said the same thing. I've actually said something really quite different. Once saved, always saved is a presumption with nothing in the middle.

[5 : 26] But the person who is saved and is saved forever shows the fruit of that salvation forever. It's known as the perseverance of the saints. The very fact that you continue in faith and not unbelief is the very fact that you are, that God is proving to you that he has saved you forever. That's important.

How do I know that God has saved me forever? Well, am I continuing in faith today? Yes. Now I know. Now, am I saved forever because I'm continuing in faith, or am I continuing in faith because God has saved me forever?

You understand the problem, okay? The issue is, is that when God saves a person, he does save them forever, but he doesn't save them then to have an attitude of presumption. Israel got very presumptuous.

We have everything they said. We can do whatever they like, they said. And then God, in his wisdom, cut them off. They assumed that they had all of this and had it forever, and yet they did not live by faith.

They lived in unbelief, and that's why they were cut away. So God never cuts away a person who lives by faith, ever. God never cuts away a person who belongs to him by faith, ever. That's why once you are saved, you are saved by Christ forever. You are sealed with the Holy Spirit until the day of redemption. That's the security. The trouble is, is that presumption can occur in some people by the simple fact that once upon a time, this idea of making a decision. And we looked at the disciples, remember, the two who wanted to follow Jesus, the two disciples who decided to follow Jesus, but never actually followed, okay? That kind of decisionism is dangerous, incredibly dangerous, because making a decision and living that decision through is two very, very different things. So Paul wants to make it absolutely clear, God hasn't rejected you. Rather, you have rejected him through your unbelief, okay? God hasn't cut you away because you're following him. God's cut you away because you're dragging behind. You're not following at all. There's... So Israel, you can see Israel's frustration at this because they thought that the way they got close to God was to be like the elder brother. We'll do all these good things. We'll go to church on Sunday. We'll make sure we pray, and we'll make sure we pray in a place where everybody can see us and seeing that we're praying. And God looks at this and says, well, all of these are works, but the thing that's missing is faith. They are cut off because of their unbelief. And here's the real damaging thing. They can't see it.

[8 : 18] And Paul explains why they can't see it. Have you ever asked yourself a question? As a pastor, I ask myself a lot, why is it the case that I can't see my own sin sometimes? And why is it the case that other people can't see their sin sometimes? And it comes down to the type of sin that's being committed. There is a sin that you can commit that can make you blind to your own sin and which then leads to unbelief. That's the sin that God's people commit here. Now, when the Gentiles come to faith, Paul says, I'm going to magnify my ministry amongst the Gentiles in order to make the Jews jealous because everything that the Gentiles are now enjoying is something that the Jews have always enjoyed.

But now they're missing out and they're missing out because of their unbelief. The Gentiles are enjoying all of these promises of God because of their faith, but everybody else isn't because of their unbelief.

But then he tells the church this, don't become arrogant. Don't become arrogant because the root supports the branch and you're the branch. The promises were made to the people of God and the promises, he also says, are irrevocable. They've been cut off, but they're going to be included back in again. I mean, that's how the passage ends. God cuts them off, not as a means of them not being saved, but as a means of discipline in order to bring them back. I don't know if you've ever read Corinthians. It's not a very likable passage by the church, but it clearly teaches, clearly teaches that if someone in the church is continuing in sin, they're to be sent out from the church. They're to be cut away from the church. Now, we don't practice that. We should. I try to practice it, but it doesn't happen because we don't like to offend people. Okay? This will give the church a bad image, people say, okay? But actually, the lesson is, if you don't do it, it damages everything else. Okay? If we're going to be like God, we have to be like God in every area. And so, what Paul is saying here is simply something that he also says to the church at Corinth. So, don't think that because you've been grafted in that you're somehow better than Israel or that you're somehow not able to make the same mistakes they did. And this is why Paul says very clearly that if they were able to be cut away, then you too also face the potential of being cut away for exactly the same reasons. Sin and your unbelief. So, it's a heavy passage. It doesn't come across that easy. You read it and you leave, you finish reading it feeling depressed. You think, well, can I not skip to Romans chapter 12?

Well, you know, how many times have I said about Christians who read their daily reading books, if you read them, like Christian horoscopes? You know, they don't like today's message, so they turn the page and read tomorrow's. You know, this is perfectly acceptable. Well, what's actually happening when you do that is you're rallying against the wisdom of God. You don't like what you've been told, and so you want to hear something else. You want to hear something different. Well, the church, therefore, can make exactly the same mistakes that the people of God did of old, and that's the lesson here. And we're being taught the lesson so that we don't make the mistakes. But then it finishes with a very wonderful lesson that God's promises are irrevocable. And what that means is this. Let me try and put it in a modern illustration. I know a pastor in America who was literally caught with his pants down and yet had a terrific preaching ministry.

And people are scratching their heads as to why this is the case. How can that happen? And I try to point out that there's a big difference between God working through a vessel for the blessing and benefit of others than the vessel themselves. Right? You know, God can speak through donkeys and asses, and he continues to do the same today, as one pastor said. Not me. Well, I've just said it.

[12:35] But the point is, is that when God gives a gift, okay, God's gift is irrevocable, and God's gift to an unbelieving Israel, okay, who don't deserve anything, God's still going to give them these gifts. Why?

Because when God gives eternal life, when God gives salvation, okay, it's always yours. But what do you do with a child, for instance, in the home? You know, have you ever been in that situation where they have something and they're not treating it well, and so what do you take it away from them? Until you learn how to treat it better. When you learn how to treat it better, you can then have it back. Well, in a small kind of way, that's kind of what God does with us. Why does the Lord give and take away? In the life of Job, okay, is a whole different issue. But in the life of the church, it's a little bit more complicated. And so this brings us to a very important lesson from the past.

How are we to understand what we are being taught here? How can a people belonging to God at the same time not belong to God? I mean, that is confusing. It is difficult to get your head around. How can a people who have been promised so many blessings then not receive those blessings if God is the one who promised them? How does that actually work? Well, as we've already seen, Israel squandered all the blessings that they had, and this is how they did it. And this is how the church does it. So listen carefully. One of my favorite ministers, who's dead and gone but left several writings, is a guy by the name of Cotton Mather in the States, Puritan back in the day. He actually came, ministered in a place called Salem in America, very famous for witches. Okay. And he ministered in dark times in that period in Salem. And Cotton Mather had this to say. Brilliant. I'll never forget it. It's one of my favorite quotes, that faithfulness begat prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother. Okay. Faithfulness gave birth to prosperity and the daughter, prosperity, then devoured the mother, faithfulness. Israel were faithful and they were faithful to God and their faithfulness led to tons and tons of blessings, many, many blessings. But then the daughter, the blessings, they loved more than their own faithfulness to God. And those blessings that they enjoyed so much, then devoured their own faithfulness to God. And then the blessings stopped. See, we tend to think that we can, that things aren't connected, but actually things are always connected. So as

Cotton Mather said, faithfulness gives birth to prosperity, gives birth to blessing, gives birth to all of these privileges that God has. But the inherent danger in those gifts is that if you love the gifts more than, than the God who gave them, it'll destroy your faithfulness. I think one of the reasons why the church perhaps isn't as blessed as it could be, is because God knows in his wisdom that it would destroy the little faithfulness that the church has towards God in the first place. Truly believe that.

And I think that is being seen here. I can remember a minister saying to me, Daniel, you need to understand that some blessings can only be handled with a lot of prayer and a lot of wisdom, and you're not praying enough. Well, here I am just coming to the ministry thinking that I'm doing a pretty good job and I get slapped down like that. Was he right? Absolutely right. Some blessings, and this has been a hard lesson for me to learn as a pastor personally, can only be handled with a huge amount of prayer and a huge amount of wisdom. And when you have that faithfulness there, then the blessings come, because then they can be handled. Okay? Some blessings cannot be handled without that being in place first. And that's the lesson that we learn here. Israel had it, and then they threw it all away.

[16:50] You know, why is it the case that men, when they get to a certain age, want to throw everything away rather than men in their 20s? Well, should I give you the simple answer? Because men in their 20s don't have anything to throw away. Okay? Men in their 20s, they don't have anything. Men, see, I'm now coming into, not that I have much, but I'm now coming into that age bracket, okay, where the modern version, it's called a midlife crisis. Biblical, it's called the Solomon. Okay? Solomon and David.

David did exactly the same. When David had everything, it was at the point when David had everything, he was tempted to throw it all away. And he did. He threw it all away. But he wasn't tempted to throw it all away as a young shepherd boy fighting Goliath. Why? Because he didn't have anything. Temptation comes when you have much. And what do you do with it? You can either use it for the glory of God, or you throw it away. Israel had much, and they threw it away. And that's the problem.

The sin that they were committing has been spoken of here. This is what Elijah says in verse 2. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah?

How he speaks of God against Israel. Lord, they have killed your prophets. Israel's done this. God's people have killed God's prophets. They have demolished your altars. God's people have demolished God's altars. And only I am left, Elijah says. Here I am, all on my own, with thousands of people around me who have rejected you. In fact, they even killed people like me. Elijah was a prophet.

They even killed people like me, Elijah says. Then God has this to say in chapter, sorry, in verse 4. This is the reason, okay, this is the reason for why they threw it all away. But what God, but what is God's reply to him? I have kept from myself 7,000 men who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Two things to learn here. Number one, if God did not spare 7,000 men, then none would be spared.

[19 : 06] Okay? What that means is this, that if God is not merciful with you, you don't have a future. Okay? I don't have a future if God's not merciful with me.

The reason his mercy is new every morning is so that we can live that day. If God does not show mercy, then there is no future for anybody. And the sin here is that these 7,000 men, including the many who are not shown mercy, bowed the knee to Baal. And Baal was an idol.

He was the fertility God. He was the one that Elijah took the mick out of when it came to making the altar and filling it with wood and then pouring water over it and saying, right, your God go first.

No, my God, no, sorry, your God go first. He didn't pour water over it at that point. And because their God didn't turn up. So Elijah was saying things like, well, perhaps he's stuck on the toilet, you know, taking the mick. Now, would you do that to a Muslim with Allah? No, you'd be petrified, absolutely petrified. Elijah isn't. He is ribbing the God of Baal, right, left, and center with no fear. Why?

Because of the truth of his own God. But then God's own people bowed the knee to Baal. And this leads to the particular sin that we need to address, the sin of idolatry. Here's what it means, that when you sin in terms of idolatry, when you trust in something other than God, when you love something more than God, or that you don't love God first, I think what happens with idolatry in the church is that people love God, it's just God's not first. That's why they can still maintain the confession, I love God, I believe in God. That's not the issue. The issue is always whether or not it's priority, whether or not it's first. The issue is not whether or not you love. The issue is what place does that love take? Is it first place or second, third, or fourth? Okay, so idolatry is when your love for God takes a different place than first place. When you're trusting God takes a different place than first place. And though whatever else takes first place, the thing that you're trusting in the very most is the thing that you are living for. I had to point this out to my brother yesterday, who came up and seen me, my youngest brother. And he said, well, what do you think I'm living for? I said, well, if I ask you the question, what do you think you're living for? You don't know.

[21 : 44] But if I ask you, what is the one thing if you lost it, you wouldn't want to live tomorrow, then you'll know what you're living for. I said, well, what is the one thing if you lost it, you wouldn't want to live for tomorrow? He gave me his answer. But when I asked him, what is he living for? He said, God. Great, I said. Well, let me phrase it a different way.

What is the one thing if you lost it, you wouldn't want to live tomorrow? He said, my friends and family. I said, that's your God. It's easy for us to be convinced. Easy for us to be convinced.

The thing that we should not want to lose is God, is Christ. But when we reverse the question and ask what is the one thing that we would not want to lose that would change the way that we live tomorrow, if it's not God, then that's your idol. What's the problem with idolatry? Well, as Isaiah 6 says, as Jeremiah 2 says, as Psalm 115 clearly teaches, and as Jesus teaches in Matthew 13, that when you give your life over to an idol, it makes you spiritually malfunction. Your senses malfunction. You have eyes that cannot see, and you have ears that cannot hear. Think of Buddha Buddha in Asia. Now, the Buddha has eyes, but it cannot see. The Buddha has ears, but it cannot hear.

And those who worship him become like him. Why? Because they are deaf and blind to the things of God. They have become like what they worship. And that's one of the central truths of Scripture, that you will become like what you worship. And so, worship is absolutely central to the church, because worship is the only thing that changes a person from what they are to what God is.

But if you're not worshiping God, you are becoming like something else. And so, the same applies to whether it's your friends or your families or your work or your job or whatever it is. Those things which are spiritually, do not have the spiritual qualities that God have, will leave you having eyes that cannot see the things of God, having ears that cannot hear the Word of God, having hearts that cannot experience the truth of God deep in your soul. Okay, so the reason why idolatry is so bad is because it blinds us against the very sin that we're committing. We have eyes and ears, and we can actually see the sin that we're committing. Why? Because we've become spiritually desensitized to the things of God. Jonathan Edwards, in his book, Religious Affections, puts it this way, that wherever there is remaining sin in a person's life, that person has their spiritual senses dimmed. And wherever that sin continues to remain, it's a bit like becoming a bit more blind every day to the things of God.

[24 : 43] Just that little bit more hard of hearing every day to the Word of God. And that's exactly what it says here. If you read verse 8, God gave them a spirit of stupor. In other words, you didn't get that way by mistake. You got that way because God is teaching you a lesson. And this is why the judgment is so serious. Because if God gives you eyes that cannot see, how serious is that? And if God gives you ears that cannot hear, how serious do you think that is when it comes to the things of God? And I know that I preach sermon after sermon in this church for the last seven years, but that's the case with some people in the congregation. It breaks my heart. Why is it the case? It's not because they're not likable people. It's not because they don't serve in the church. It's because that God doesn't necessarily take first place. And listen, the pastor is not beyond this.

The pastor recognizes that he can't see his own sin at times, and it has to be pointed out to him, and the sin of idolatry takes over. We all have to repent of it. It's a problem for all of us.

Before we move on to the fact that God's gifts is irrevocable, let me just say one more thing on this issue. And that is, sometimes Christians truly do believe that it is permissible to think that as long as we trust God for salvation, then we can trust in anything else for anything else.

And that's just not true. Let me say that again, and you can work out the implications. I could work them out for you on a one-to-one basis over a cup of coffee or a cup of tea and a biscuit and a piece of cake for a couple of hours, and I'd be more than willing to spend that time with you.

I said to a person not so long ago, and they looked at me and said, how much would you charge for marriage counseling? I said, if I was to do it with you?

[26 : 55] He said, yeah. I said, it would be £2,000 for 10 lessons over 10 weeks, one hour lesson. I said, you really charge us that much?

I said, yeah. I said, but I'll make you a deal. I said, the deal will be this. You only have to pay for the lessons you miss. How about that? If you meet all 10, you don't have to pay for any.

Now, I wasn't going to charge them at all, and they're too far away to do it anyway, because all the way down in Devon, not Cornwall. It would have been £1,000 if they were in Cornwall.

The fact that they were in Devon, it's £2,000. You would do the same with the English. Come on. Yes, you see, there's a few nodding heads there. Now, of course, I would never charge anybody for anything.

But you see, it's like I was saying earlier about Adam Smith and the Bruni guy. We have lost the sense of what it is to be sacrificial to one another.

[27 : 57] We have lost the sense of what it is to be truly committed. We measure everything in terms of its monetary value. And so when it comes to God, we think, when it comes to salvation and trusting God, because that cannot be measured in money, as long as I am trusting God in that area, then everything else when it comes to trust is permissible.

And it's just not true. That's idolatry. That's idolatry. We don't think that. That's exactly what Paul is teaching here.

That we are to trust God in all things. We are to put God first in all things, in all matters. It is not permissible to trust God for your salvation, and then trust in other things for everything else you think you might want or need.

God and God alone should be the very center of our trust. Primary. Anything else is idolatry.

Anything else is unbelief. Now, here's a few considerations as we close. The first is this, that God's gifts are irrevocable.

[29 : 11] God makes his people jealous, and someone said, well, why is it okay for God to be jealous and not me? You know, God wants me to be like him, and yet God tells me that he is allowed to be a jealous God, and he doesn't let me be jealous.

That doesn't seem fair. Well, let me just explain the difference between God's jealousy and yours. When God is jealous, he is jealous for that which is his. When you are jealous, you are jealous for something that which is not yours.

That's the difference between jealousy. Now, if a man is jealous for his wife, and the wife is jealous for her husband when it comes to other people, that's a good kind of jealousy. You know, that's because it belongs to you.

Okay? The person belongs to you. Same with family members. Same with anything. That's fine. But the kind of jealousy that God has here for his people is that they're his people. And the reason he makes his people jealous, you think, that's a strange way to bring people back to the faith.

Make them jealous. But God's ways are not our ways, right? He makes them jealous because these people know, deep in their heart, that God is their God.

[30 : 15] And yet all these Gentiles are enjoying all the blessings. All these Gentiles are enjoying the blessings and benefits, and we're not. And yet that's their God. And God uses that jealousy.

Why? Because they're jealous for the right thing. It's not a sinful jealousy. They're right to be jealous over that because God belongs to them. And they belong to God.

God is jealous for you. When you're out in the world, you need to understand that God is jealous over you. And that means it's because you belong to him.

He wants you just for himself. He doesn't mind you having everything else, but that's the jealousy that God has for you, is the very opposite of the idolatry that we commit.

Here's another consideration. Romans chapter 11 clearly teaches us that without God's mercy, no one can have a future.

[31 : 19] That without God being merciful, there is no future for anybody. If God did not spare the 7,000 here, then there would be nobody left. The other thing is that this, that unbelief is a real danger, is a real danger that should be taken seriously by God's people.

You know, someone once said that you hear, you know, out and about when it gets to mass questions on the TV, or even in a conversation, people will say, I'm not very good at math.

But you never hear anybody say, oh, I'm not very good at English. Why? Well, the same thing happens in the church, doesn't it?

People say, you know, oh, I believe that. Oh, I don't believe that. Yeah, that kind of unbelief is incredibly dangerous. Because a little bit of unbelief always leads to more unbelief.

You need to understand that when people are not believing, you need to be worried for them. You need to pray to God for them. But even if it's only a little bit over a small thing of God, you need to pray that they repent of their unbelief.

[32 : 39] And as I've said before, and I'll say it again as we close, that some people have to repent of their unbelief far more often than they do have to repent over the sin that they committed 10 years ago.

Those people who just cannot accept that God has forgiven them for the sin that they committed five years ago, 10 years ago, two years ago, whatever it may be, need to repent of their unbelief.

Because God's gifts are irrevocable. When God does something, he does it properly. And if you can't believe that, you are dealing with unbelief. And that needs repenting of.

See, unbelief is not just a concern for people who are not saved. It's a real concern for people who are saved. Because it destroys your faith and life in God. It just makes you less of who God has actually called you to be.

So here's the exhortation. Guard your heart from unbelief. Guard your heart from unbelief. We have a future because God is merciful.

[33 : 44] And the testimony of everyone in this room should be the same testimony that Paul finishes with here. For who has known the mind of the Lord and who has been his counselor?

Who has given him a gift that he should be repaid? The answer, no one. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever.

Amen. Amen. Amen.