

Getting Started

Paul concludes his three-chapter summary on the salvation history of Israel. He is demonstrating to the believers in Rome that the gospel has been at work in Israel—past, present, and future—just as it is presently at work among the Gentiles. Most importantly in chapter 11, he proves that God’s Word to Israel has not been rescinded—that Israel’s greatest day of salvation is still ahead. What seems to be a reduction in the number of Israelites who are sharing in covenant blessings is the result of unbelief in Israel. Israel’s unbelief caused God to allow a partial hardening to come over the nation so that the blessings of salvation might be taken directly to the Gentiles by God’s messengers (like Paul), a task originally assigned to Israel. Then, when the full number of the Gentiles has come in (to the kingdom of God), “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). – Ken Boa

- What does Romans 11 teach you about the character of God?

Discussion

- Explain how these principles are illustrated in Romans 11.
 - God keeps His promises.
 - God is willing to harden those who are disobedient to His revelation.
 - God is willing to create conditions that motivate the wayward to desire Him.
 - Jewish believers today are part of the remnant in Israel.
 - Gentile believers are part of a witness to attract Jews to God and His blessings.
 - All who believe do so by God’s mercy.
- How would the references to Paul (v1) and the Prophet Elijah (vv2-11) encourage Jews and Gentiles to believe that God still has a future plan for His chosen nation, Israel?
- What does the metaphor of the olive tree with the grafted branches express reveal about the relationship between God, the Jews and the Gentiles (vv 11-24)?

For additional thought ...

Paul’s beautiful use of the picture of grafting is one of the most remarkable images in Scripture. Like Jesus’ use of pruning as an image in John 15, however, illustrations that served as metaphors in biblical days are foreign to those not familiar with agrarian cultures. The teacher of the Bible who does background research into these agricultural examples will benefit his or her students greatly.

For instance, learning about the differences between the wild olive tree (vv. 17, 24; agrielaos) and the cultivated olive tree (v. 24; kallielaios) can be instructive. Primarily, the differences can be seen as the results of care and cultivation. The wild olive tree is more like a large shrub, a few feet in height, and produces an inferior quality of oil. The cultivated olive tree, however, can reach heights of thirty feet and produce a fine quality of oil for hundreds of years. The cultivated olive tree, planted from a seedling, bears no fruit for its first ten years. Only then, having matured sufficiently, does it begin to provide a harvest for its owner. And when the harvest is taken in October and November, it is done by thrashing the trees with large sticks, or violently shaking the trees, knocking the olives to the ground, after which they are crushed to release their oil.

It is normal to transform a wild olive tree into a fruit-bearing tree by grafting a branch from a cultivated tree into the trunk of a wild tree. Paul interestingly reverses the order, saying that God has grafted a wild branch (the Gentiles) into the trunk of a cultivated tree (Israel). Rather than accuse Paul of horticultural ignorance (he admits his illustration is “contrary to nature,” v. 24), is he possibly depending on awareness of olive trees in the Mediterranean culture to heighten his point?

The Gentiles were like wild shrubs—uncared for, fruitless, springing up randomly across the earth. The Jews, however, had been cultivated and cared for by God, given order and direction from the master gardener. The root of Israel was what held value. For hundreds of years it had been established and prepared; it only made sense for him to picture the Gentiles as being grafted into that historic, cultivated root of spiritual life so that they might bring forth the fruit thereof (fruit only harvested through violence and “suffering”). Care must always be given in expanding metaphors beyond the simple point addressed by the biblical writer. But where pictures abound in God’s created order, there are often helpful spiritual parallels and insights to be discovered. (Ken Boa)

- Who is included as Israel in the phrase “All Israel shall be saved” in 11:26?
- How does Paul describe God in 11:33-36? Note as many observations as you can. Why is this passage an appropriate response to 9:1-11:32?
- Select one or more of these applications questions to discuss.
 - What fears in my life can be relieved by trusting in God’s promises?
 - In what areas of my life have I become casual about obedience to God?
 - Have I failed to thank God for a situation that he used to renew my love for him?
 - How do I see Jewish people today? Do I see them as part of the plan of God?
 - What is there about my life that would attract a Jewish person to Christ?
 - How can Christians stimulate one another to increase the fruitfulness of their lives, i.e., to avoid being blinded to spiritual realities by sin? What should you do if a professing Christian appears insensitive to spiritual truth? How is spiritual blindness or hardness removed?
 - Should Gentile Christians have any sense of gratitude toward the Jewish race for the role Israel has played in the inclusion of Gentiles? What role should Gentile believers in the body of Christ take in stimulating Israel’s desire to seek a true relationship with God?

Prayer

Father, I thank and praise you for your plan of salvation that encompasses all the peoples of the earth. I thank you for your faithfulness to Israel, as I know you will likewise be faithful to me. Help me to see your elect nation with new eyes, and to hear their needs with new ears. Help me to be a small part of what creates a hunger in them, and in others, for you.

Spend time meditating phrase by phrase on the doxology of 11:33-36. Next, use each phrase as a starting point for your prayers of praise.

Join Pastor Mike this Thursday (6/20) for our monthly prayer gathering at 7pm in the Loft.