

The Epistle to the Romans ch.11 Dispensational: Israel's Future

[The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

My children are often trying to tell me things that they think are really important and usually when I am a little distracted. Often it is stuff that, although important to them, is not actually that necessary – they regularly forget what they were going to tell me. However, there are often little gems in there which could be an activity they have done which is a key part of their progression and I am glad that they have told me about it. It would be easy to just dismiss the things said by my children, but if I were to do that, I would miss out on these special things that are part of bringing up children. Such things occur in many areas of life, so much so that the term small print is now one of those things that most of us will have heard of.

I have written and recorded this talk during the Coronavirus lock down of 2020 and my topic of Israel's future could well be one of those things that fall into a similar position as the 'important' things that my children want to tell me. It would be reasonable to dismiss the future of Israel as a luxury during a pandemic. However, I think it can easily be classed as one of those little gems that you do not want to miss. Learning about how God keeps His promises and provides salvation is exactly the sort of reminder of the faithfulness of God that we need.

Our topic for this talk is the last in a set of three aligned to chapters 9 to 11 of the book of Romans. The specific title that we are considering is Israel's Future with the previous two being Israel's past and present.

Romans is an excellent book which systematically and comprehensively presents the whole case of the world's standing before God and subsequently how He has moved to provide salvation to so many. It has often been likened to a court answer against accusations made against the teachings of Christianity. Chapter 11 follows this pattern as it presents these three important aspects of how God has dealt with the future of Israel, fully maintaining His purposes and plans for grace upon those in whom He has an interest.

My intention is to go through the verses that are in this chapter, considering some of the key themes that are brought up as we go through it. I would recommend getting your Bible out as we go through because there is so much crammed into this chapter. As I have been looking at this subject, I have split Romans chapter 11 into the following three sections:

- The Remnant – verses 1 to 10
- Israel's Fall and our Blessing – verses 11 to 24
- Israel's Salvation – verses 25 to 36

It is a very full chapter and has a lot of content that could initiate a full discussion on their own. However, before we start looking at these verses, I will digress a little in order to consider some key questions regarding the issue of Israel's future.

First, we have the question of whether the blessings that were given to Israel in the past have now been transferred to the Church. This is a common idea and it certainly makes aspects of these things easier as you just apply these things in terms of the Gospel, and we do not have to worry about where any distinction might lie. The content of this talk does not follow this interpretation so I will not specifically deal with it elsewhere. I have found that such a line of thinking regarding Israel, although on occasion simplifying a complex question, will cause more difficulty and complication with many passages of the Bible that deal with Israel. Our chapter today is a case in point in that it would have no necessity to be written if Israel's promises were simply passed to the Church. In fact, you could argue that Paul was not really being helpful by writing in this way if he meant for people to understand that Israel's blessings were to be passed to the Church. It cannot be denied that the issue of how Israel and the Church are dealt with in the Bible can be complex and sometimes difficult to distinguish and understand. But many things that are to do with God's ways are complex. Just consider the issue that the Lord Jesus is both God and Man! To try and remove such problems through simplification of an issue will only lead to further issues.

Our next question might be to say that these things are important for Israel, but we do not really need to worry about them. Perhaps this is even taken to the level that says that the Old Testament is not even worth considering because it is all about Israel. There are many ways that this question can be tackled, and many scriptures to quote to argue against this view, such as Luke 24. I also hope that as we look through chapter 11 of Romans, we will see why it would be a great loss for us to dismiss these things, just because they might be dealing with those outside of the Church.

My final question is concerning how we distinguish who Israel is, who this passage can be applied to. There is of course a country currently in the world that is called Israel and it is at the centre of so many issues, not just locally, but globally. How do we then consider these things in our chapter today and the current establishment that carries the same name? There are many who would say that the current nation is the same chosen people of Israel. It is extremely easy to look at things such as the 6-day war in 1967 and think that this must mean that what is called Israel now is the biblical nation of Israel. However, I am not quite sure we can apply the direct correlation between the Israel that are God's chosen people and the people who occupy the land now. You may ask why I hold this view, and it is the same reason I would say that not everyone who goes to church is a Christian. To have any place before God requires faith in Him, acceptance of His authority. I have no doubt that that saved remnant will include individuals from the current country that is Israel, probably even a majority. But it will only be the faithful ones whom God saves, as has ever been the case.

The Remnant

Let us get to our first section which is the Remnant which covers the first 10 verses of Chapter 11. I am just going to read the first seven verses:

“I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”? But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work. What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded.”

The subject of the remnant of Israel is both fascinating and encouraging through the Old Testament. This particular occurrence, mentioned in these verses, is used almost in the same way that it was used when it took place. The purpose was to remind Elijah what he should have known that, despite how things may seem, God is never without those who are faithful to His ways. Following the glory days of king Solomon, the nation of Israel split in two and from that point on they were not fulfilling their role in the world. They were the chosen people who were supposed to be an example of God's ways to the rest of the world around them. From this point, we see that the remnant comes to the fore, providing us with wonderful examples of individuals being used by God to do incredible things.

We look at this example of Elijah and we are told that God had kept his remnant amongst a faithless and evil nation. If we think of Daniel, we see an example of at least four (Daniel and his three friends) who are members of the remnant during the time of exile. Then we have a final one which is the mention of the remnant in Malachi at the end of the Old Testament, where the nation is really under subjection to those around, leading to an apathy towards God. Another wonderful feature of these examples is that often they enable a great work to occur after we hear about them. Elijah was succeeded by Elisha who was a most wonderful prophet of God. Daniel is most likely the main influencer of Darius, prior to Cyrus, who sent the Israelites back to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem. What about Malachi? Well, we just have to look at two old people in Simeon and Anna, whom we read about in Luke's Gospel. We may not always remember these two, but what faith and trust in God they had, and clearly they were two who were part of that remnant of God.

However, we could ask the question why is Paul bringing this topic in here in the eleventh chapter of Romans? That is answered in verse five where we see that word 'grace'. This is the key point as God is keeping those in the nation now in the same way He has since Solomon's reign ended. Many of the remnant through the ages would have no opportunity to do any of the things that had been laid down by Moses. Celebration of the Passover and sacrifices could not be done. We could easily be forgiven for thinking that since they do not take place then the nation does not exist. But here Paul says it continued to exist and still does, not because of any activities, but because of the grace of God who has kept those who belong to Him. God in grace chose the people of Israel as a people who would belong to Him, and He continues to ensure that His promises to them are not forgotten and lost.

But we are perhaps treading on dangerous ground here. Do we suggest here what Paul had so clearly disputed in chapter 6 of Romans, that grace would simply mean that it does not really matter what we do? Verses 8 to 10, of course, suggest otherwise. The grace of God is only for those who have faith, as it has ever been. The evil actions of those of the house of Israel has resulted in blindness for others so that they do not see the grace of God even if it is before them. We are drawn here to that statement back in Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 and 7 where the LORD states:

“And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.””

This was declared to Moses on Mount Sinai following the incident of the Golden Calf. In that scene, we see great grace from God, but also His judgement and righteousness. Paul is bringing us right back to that scene here for the people of Israel. This is not a case of 'do what you want because I will save some of you anyway.' God still demands faith from His remnant, and He judges His unfaithful people.

Israel's Fall and our Blessing

Perhaps we can now move onto our next section which I have titled 'Israel's Fall and our Blessing'. This discussion brings natural questions about Israel such as, why should God let them stumble? Why does He even bother with a remnant? Paul now spends some time answering this question, and what an answer it is! I will not read the passage here as it is quite long, but it is something worth reading. Paul is now explaining the wisdom of God. He explains that through this change in His dealings with the world He is able to bring His people back to Himself. But also, God allows His grace to spread out into the world so that all who seek it can enjoy His blessings and love. Now mixed in with this is something of a personal touch from the apostle bringing the joy it is for a Jew to be saved now. Their history is such that being saved should give them a greater appreciation of the grace of God. I don't want to dwell on this too much as it is not my subject, except to say that it is clear from this that our aim, like Paul's, must be to bring any who are Jews to the Lord Jesus Christ and His saving work.

But we move on to the rest of our second section where Paul now delves a bit deeper into the workings of God in this world. The full title of our talk includes that term dispensational, which is once again a tricky subject to bring up because it causes debate and conflict amongst people. Dispensation is a term found in the Bible, but is sometimes translated as stewardship. This is quite a helpful change to make because stewardship is a good way to describe it. It is how God manages things in the world.

Here Paul is introducing God as the great gardener through a number of different analogies. In verse 16 we have two pictures to tell us a vital lesson for dispensational teaching. We have the picture of firstfruits and then of the roots. These give us guidance that as God deals with things in different ways in this world, it does not mean that they have somehow lost their holiness. It is saying that He was what made them holy. Israel was not somehow special and then lost it over time; they were always awful! But God dealing with them made them His chosen people and therefore acceptable to Himself. This is the same for us now. The Church of God is not something that God has picked out of a store of good things; it is He who has made it good.

We now move onto some rather strange gardening techniques as we look at removal of branches and grafting in wild ones, and then removing those and grafting in the original ones. It is all really strange, and we wouldn't do this at home, but then it is a picture trying to explain the ways of God. It is not a new picture either. Jeremiah is a book that is full of these instances. Now I am going to renege on my earlier statement that we are not dealing with the nation here, but it is the only part where I will. The parts of this picture of the branches are as follows:

- The roots – God's righteous dealings with the world
- The branches – The Israelite nation – that is the establishment that manages it
- The wild olive shoot – The Gentile nations

Now, I am sure people can find lots of other branches that could be considered, but these are the ones being considered here. When each is connected to the root it means that God is directly using them for His purposes in the world. They are then subsequently used as His channels for grace. Paul is clear here that the nation of Israel has been broken off. The Gentiles are now being used and that has led to the widespread outpouring of the grace of God in this Church age that we are living through. This is how God has planned things to bring the remnant back to Himself, whilst bringing blessing to countless souls.

These verses, 20 to 24, are a warning that God will remove from His blessing those who do not recognise His authority. Let me take a moment again to stress a key point though. This passage can by no means be used to say people who are believers in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ can be cast off by God. These words are regarding the dealings of God with the nations of the world. We can see through history how often seemingly impenetrable nations have been

brought low or destroyed. Genghis Khan's empire fell almost overnight when he died. More recently the Soviet Union's demise was as swift as it was unexpected. But those who belong to the Lord Jesus are no longer those who live bound by the world's systems. We have our future dwelling in heaven, and therefore, should be beyond the constraints of the systems we see around about us.

Israel's Salvation

We come now to the final section of the chapter, covering verses 25 to 36. I will just read up to verse 35 now:

“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

“The Deliverer will come out of Zion,
And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;
For this is My covenant with them,
When I take away their sins.”

Concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

“For who has known the mind of the LORD?

Or who has become His counsellor?”

“Or who has first given to Him
And it shall be repaid to him?””

So here we get to the main point of Paul's subject of Israel's future, and it is that they do indeed have a future! Paul has given some details about how God has kept a remnant and how He works with the nations of this world. All of this was to show that God is concerned with these things, and that He has a plan to save His long-lost people. Paul wants his readers to understand two things. Firstly, that nobody can be proud when it comes to blessings of God. We cannot sit back and declare how wonderful we are or think that we have not failed like they did. Any position of blessing before God is ultimately because of His interest and grace to us. This is the drive behind Ephesians 2, which is confirmed in verses 8 and 9 which state:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

We do have a natural tendency to boast. Our only comparison though should be with the Lord Jesus, His life, and His salvation work. When we think of the Cross, we should always consider that it was our failure that caused the nails to pierce His hands and feet; that it was our sin that He took upon Himself. Focussing on this will mean that there is no place for boasting, as we are well short of His measure.

The second vital point is that God will do what He has planned to do. We can debate all day long about how it might happen; what about the other 10 tribes that were lost? Who exactly will it be and why does He even bother with them? Such questions are all immaterial because if God has purposed to do it, nothing will stop it from happening. How thankful we can be that so often God's purposes and plans are all geared towards the salvation of those who are faithful to Him.

I just want to look now at what we can get out of this chapter. Considering anything to do with Israel can often be considered a more academic exercise in Bible knowledge. However, I find that there is much for us to gain here. We have seen that God is working in this world for His purposes. This is a helpful point to make as such a subject can bring up questions about whether we should become political in order to promote God's ways. People may feel that perhaps we should make a stand with Israel now! In this chapter it is clear that God is doing the working, without any of our help. Looking at the analogy, He is doing so through some rather brutal and decisive gardening. We should consider carefully before making any decisions to get involved with trying to change the world.

We also see God's grace working in the background to secure a people for Himself. Finally, and the main thing we can take from this, we see the faithfulness of God. Israel has always been a picture for us to learn from. How much comfort we can gain for our own salvation when we see that God will save Israel ultimately. No matter how awful or pathetic or full of failure they have been, He is going to save them! Is that not a picture for us? As believers we go through this life often failing and working against the pathway that we should follow. Yet we can know that, through faith in the Lord Jesus we will be brought home to glory. The story and future of Israel is just another wonderful confirmation that God will do that which He has promised.

I will just close with the final verse of our chapter:

“For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever.
Amen.”

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