

Sermon Draft

Text: Romans 11:1–2a, 13–15, 28–32

Sermon: “Mercy for All”

In recent times, there’s been an alarming resurgence of anti-Semitism, or hate for people of Jewish ethnicity. Old prejudices have returned against those who by birth are descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. One would think that events of the twentieth century, especially the Holocaust during World War II, would have finally brought about “never again.” But in recent times, even elected representatives in the US Congress have spoken out against those who are Jews.

When Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans, it must have seemed to Gentile Christians that the grace of God, previously available to the Jews, was no longer for them but was now only for the Gentiles. The number of Gentile Christians was growing. It was tempting to think that the Jews were no longer God’s favored people. In Gentile eyes, it appeared God had rejected Israel. In Romans, Paul, a Jew, and former Pharisee now called by God to be the *“apostle to the Gentiles,”* responds emphatically, *“May it never be!”* For God rejects none but bestows His gifts on all who turn to him and believe.

Although Israel was disobedient in the past, God's plan for them remained.

The history of Israel is well known. Chosen by God as his people through whom the Messiah would come and bless all the nations of the world, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob longed to see Christ's day. Though they would be slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years, God gave his people Moses to lead them to the land he had promised. Along the way, they received God's law and covenant that he would be with them and bless them with his presence if they kept his commands.

But they did not obey! They did not keep God's commandments. Shortly after being delivered from Pharaoh and witnessing the destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, Israel turned away from God and formed an idol for themselves.

Later, they grumbled against Moses and God. So, God sent snakes, and a bronze serpent was put up on a pole so that all who looked at it were saved. Then, upon reaching the Promised Land, Israel doubted that God would help them defeat the idolatrous occupants and take possession.

Once in the land, they desired a king rather than God. Eventually they turned to false gods, which they were supposed to have rid the land of.

The prophets warned. God's people continued to disobey. He used Gentile nations to conquer and destroy. The people were taken into captivity, and there they wondered how this could have happened to them. God could have easily let them sit in exile and rot, but he did not. After seventy years, it was time to return home.

Although back in the land, the Jews appeared less and less to be God's chosen people set apart for a higher purpose. Eventually even the prophets spoke no more. Had God given up on his people? Had he cast them aside, even as they had rejected him time after time throughout their history? Did God's patience run out? Was his mercy withdrawn? No!

In the Old Testament Book of 1 Kings, we read how the prophet Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal and then had them all slain. But afterward, he fled for his own life because the wicked queen Jezebel sought to kill him.

Elijah went into hiding and spoke against Israel to God. He was convinced that he was the only faithful Israelite left, and he preferred just to die. But remember the surprising word God had for Elijah? He was not alone! Seven thousand remained who had not bent the knee in worship to Baal. Such faithfulness counts in God's eyes. Although not a part of our reading today, Paul uses the example of Elijah in this chapter, beginning with the second half of verse 2, and shows God's grace. There remained in Israel in Elijah's day a remnant faithful to God.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul is certain that God has not rejected Israel. After all, he himself is a living example of God's mercy. For who persecuted the church more than he, as he went about hunting down Christians? His conversion changed everything; not only was he called to faith in Christ, but he became the Lord's apostle to the Gentiles. And for it he had to suffer (Acts 9:16). Paul would learn that God had a plan of salvation for all humankind, and it included Jews like himself as well as Gentiles.

God's grace is for all people. The Jews sinned by rejecting God's grace and relying on a righteousness of their own making. They had become works of the Law. By their works, they were unable ever to acquire God's grace for themselves; it's a free gift of God through Jesus Christ.

It turned out, though, that the rejection of Israel brought salvation to the nations. Gentile Christians who repented of their sins, especially of the pagan idolatry that was so much a part of their Roman world, and who turned in faith to Christ were now recipients of God's free grace. In our text, Paul tells the Gentile Christians not to make the same mistake as Israel. He cautions them about sinful pride in having received mercy. *"Now I am speaking to you Gentiles"* (v 13).

Just as the Jews looked down on the Gentiles, relying on their race and works making them the special people of God, now the Gentiles also were not to look upon the Jews and consider them rejected.

Our Epistle is taken from verses at the beginning, middle, and end of chapter 11. This chapter is one of three chapters—9, 10, and 11—that form a unit within the letter.

It is here that Paul deals with salvation of the Jews. We recall how chapters 1–8 of Romans build up the theme of the righteousness of God and faith. Now these three chapters, 9, 10, and 11, are about Paul’s love for his fellow Jews and his concern for their salvation. ***“I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them”*** (11:13–14).

At the beginning of the letter, Paul speaks right away about the Gospel. It is the Good News that God had ***“promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures”*** (1:2). He further points out that God’s plan to save all people was to happen through the Jews. ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”*** (1:16), and ***“the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God”*** (3:2). Paul seeks to show early on that there are no advantages because of race or nationality. ***“Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin”*** (3:9).

The great theme of this letter, righteousness by faith, is behind our text. Paul wants to preclude all kinds of works. For the Jews, it was their dependence on the law and striving to obtain righteousness that was their disobedience. For the Greeks, who obtained grace by the disobedience of the Jews, they were to see that their salvation comes by the mercy of God shown to them (11:28–32). Paul’s emphasis, then, is on election.

We see, then, that Paul had to address the difficult question all Christians face at some time. If a person rejects Christ, is it because that person was first rejected by God? Is there a doctrine in the Bible more misused than that of election? Those who don’t join with Luther and see righteousness through faith in Christ as a gift are tempted to strive to obtain it by works or blame God when it seems there are those who are cast away. To that, we join Paul in saying, “*By no means!*”

But returning to Israel, God mysteriously tells us that Jacob he loved and Esau he did not (Romans 9:13), although both came from the same promise. How this can be is not meant for human minds either to understand or explain.

Paul himself, compelled by the depth of it, penned the great hymn of praise of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God at the end of our chapter. (That's next week's Epistle.) God's plan of mercy is a mystery, but it includes all who believe.

Although Paul was sent to the Gentiles, he always went first to his fellow Jews. When they rejected him, his going to the Gentiles grew the Church!

Now in Romans 11, though, the apostle St. Paul speaks again about the Jews—now about the Jews being jealous of the Gentiles. Paul observes how the grace of God to the Gentiles was causing Jews who had rejected both Christ and the Gospel to become jealous of the Gentile Christians. They saw what had been given to them—that is, God's mercy and grace—now going to the Gentiles, albeit through faith (v 14).

Normally we don't think of jealousy as a good thing, but in this case it worked for good, drawing the Jews into God's salvation through Jesus Christ. We don't usually think of God using "reverse psychology," but this sure looks like it. . . . And who better than God to know how humans think?

The salvation of all people is in the cross of Jesus. Jesus was handed over to wicked men to be crucified. On the cross, he became the sacrifice for the payment of sin. Through Christ, the Father was reconciling the world to himself.

And he arose! He appeared to the apostles, and to as many as five hundred of his followers. Then he ascended to the Father. And whoever believes in him has life in his name.

God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (v 29). God works out his plan one way or another to fulfill his desire to show mercy to all.

This mercy shown to us compels us, like Paul, earnestly to pray and to preach and proclaim Christ to all people, so that all may believe and be saved.

Amen