

MERCY

Romans 11:1-32

In Chapter ten Paul affirmed that salvation is available to all people – Jews and Gentiles. Paul quoted Old Testament Scripture from Isaiah 28:16 that tells us anyone who puts their trust in the "Chief Cornerstone" will not be confused or ashamed. Salvation works the same for Jews and Gentiles since it is the same Lord Who is over all. Access to God's provision is to simply ask in faith, believing.

While there are similarities, there are also differences. The contrast between the Israelites and the Gentiles is highlighted by this statement that Paul quoted from Isaiah.

"I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." But concerning Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."

Beginning in Chapter eleven, Paul explored the consequences of these differences. Some people in the church were speculating that because of Israel's "obstinacy and disobedience" that climaxed in the rejected and crucifixion of the Messiah that God had totally rejected them. Paul addressed this speculation in the first few verses of this chapter.

Not Rejected Now – 11:1

¹ I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. Romans 11:1 (NASB95)

Paul's proof that God had not rejected the Israelites was his own personal testimony. Paul was not rejected by God. In fact, God had chosen him for a particular ministry to advance the Kingdom of God even though Paul had been supportive of the Jews who were responsible for working with the Romans to crucify Jesus. Even beyond that, Paul had persecuted those people who were followers of Christ (the Church) who were also Israelites which could have been cited as further evidence that God had not rejected His people because of their ethnicity.

Paul also pointed to a historical situation in which the prophet Elijah thought that all of his fellow countrymen had been so evil that God was ready to totally reject the nation.

Not Rejected Then – 11:2-4

² God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ "Lord, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE." ⁴ But what is the divine response to him? "I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL." Romans 11:2-4 (NASB95)

Arguably, what the nation had done to Elijah and the other prophets was not as serious as rejecting and killing the Messiah. However, these situations were indicative of the moral and spiritual problems of the nation that had plagued them since they came out of Egypt. Even this terrible sinfulness of so many people would not thwart the plan and purpose of God in choosing Abraham to be the father of those who faithfully believe. In the time of Elijah, God had a remnant of seven thousand people who were "the faithful."

Later on, Paul would write to these Christians in Rome "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction." One way we can learn (be instructed) is by drawing parallels from Old Testament accounts to what is happening in the present time. Paul drew such a parallel from what God told Elijah about a "remnant" to those Jews who were followers of Christ during the first century.

Learning Parallel – 11:5-6

⁵ In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. Romans 11:5-6 (NASB95)

Just as Paul taught those in the church that our salvation is by grace through faith, he used another parallel comparison to emphasize that the seven thousand who remained faithful during the time of Elijah was because of God's grace. The wording of the message to Elijah ("I have kept for Myself") clearly says that God took the initiative in preserving a remnant.

A major subject of debate in the early church was regarding the role of works (which was a euphemism for keeping the law) in "salvation." Paul was careful to point out that the preserving of the remnant (during the time of Elijah and during his time) was not based on "works" or obedience to the law. This distinction is very important to keep in mind as we look at the next verse.

Seeking with Anticipation – 11:7

⁷ What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; Romans 11:7 (NASB95)

That which Israel (as a whole group) had been attempting to achieve was "a right relationship with God." Since they were attempting to achieve this "status" in their own strength by all the rites and rituals of their religious practices and meticulously following the letter of the law, they never accomplished their objective. In our 20/20 hindsight, we can see that all the things they were practicing in their religious efforts were pointing to the coming of the Messiah. However, when He did come, most of the Jews (especially the leaders) were so committed to keeping the law and practicing the rites and rituals that they rejected the very person through Whom their "justification" would be accomplished. There were some who did realize (see) what was happening and how Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled all the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah. God even sent a messenger (John the Baptist) to let the people know that was happening before the Messiah began His public ministry among the people.

During the time that Jesus was on earth, many were aware that the "time was right" for the Messiah to come based on the prophecies of Daniel. Some were looking for the Messiah with eager anticipation and some were looking for this with dread or disdain. Generally, those who were in positions of power felt threatened by any news of the Messiah because they thought that it meant that they would lose power and control. Starting with Herod around the time of the birth of Jesus and ending with the actions of Annas and Caiaphas during the time of the death of Jesus, there were those who refused to properly respond to what they could plainly see was happening. Because they rebelliously rejected what could be plainly seen, spiritual hardness developed so that they were, in effect, blinded by their own rebellion against God.

Those who were eagerly anticipating the coming of the Messiah were receptive and willing to believe (embrace) what was happening before their very eyes. Their receptive acceptance was a choice they made to draw near to God based on the conviction that they needed a Savior. As James wrote in his letter, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." This was truly a case of "many were called and few chose to respond to the call" as Jesus pointed out in the parable about the "wedding feast" in Matthew 22:1-14.

In verses 8-10 of this chapter Paul presented several passages from the Old Testament that provided evidence that God knew before that time when Jesus came, that some of His chosen people would flatly reject His plan of salvation. However, the fact that some Israelites

rejected God's plan did not mean that all Israelites would be negatively impacted by what their leaders did.

Stumbling – 11:11-12

¹¹ I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹² Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! Romans 11:11–12 (NASB95)

Previously, I had associated these verses with the ministry of Paul who would go to a particular city and seek out the Jews in that community to share the Gospel message. Those Jews would typically reject the message and then Paul would take the message to the Gentiles in that area and some would welcome and accept the Gospel. After a more careful examination of this passage, it is more likely that the “stumble” (Paul mentioned) was the rejection of God's Messiah (specifically by the Jewish leaders and followed by the masses) that resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus. In His crucifixion, He was “sacrificed” as the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This sacrifice for sin opened the way of salvation for all who have faith in (believe) that Jesus paid the price for sin (the wages of sin is death). As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “He became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

We could argue that the worst transgression a person could imagine did not result in the rejection of all Israelites but, instead, was used by God to provide the greatest benefit to all mankind which was salvation of all who believe. The response of the lost Gentile world to this good news of “salvation by grace through faith” served as an example for the Jews (who were also in a lost condition) to follow. The phrase “provoke them to jealousy” could also be translated as “provoke them to follow the example” so they could enjoy the same benefits of salvation.

Earlier in this letter (Chapter eight) Paul had written that God causes all things (good or bad) to work together for good to those who love him. If the terrible evil of crucifying the sinless Son of God brought about the opening of the way of salvation for the world, just think of what wonderful benefits and blessings would come about by the Jews embracing Jesus as God's Messiah.

Ministry to Gentiles Benefitting Jews – 11:13-15

¹³ But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴ if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? Romans 11:13–15 (NASB95)

As we see in these verses, Paul was directing his remarks primarily to those Christians in the church who came from a Gentile background to help them put the situation with the Jews in proper perspective. While Paul was called to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, he sincerely wanted that ministry and the response of the Gentiles to the Gospel to positively impact the Jews who had not embraced the Gospel. He was hoping that the miraculous transformation of the lost Gentiles becoming believing followers of God would inspire (provoke to emulation) those Jews who were still rejecting Christ to repent and accept Jesus as God's Messiah and be saved.

In verse 15 Paul used the terms “casting away” (rejecting) and “receiving” (accepting) with regard to the Jews. Most (perhaps all) interpretative commentaries that I have found take this to mean that God had rejected and will receive the Jews. The first part of that interpretation seems to be in direct conflict with Paul's answer to the question posed in verse one: “Did God reject (cast away) His people?” He emphatically stated the answer as “certainly not,” “no way,”

and “God forbid.” If verse one is correct, then we are led to conclude that verse fifteen means that the Jews were the ones who did the “rejecting” and will be the ones who need to be “accepting.” What or Whom did they reject and What or Whom will they need to accept? The obvious answer is that they rejected Christ which resulted in the crucifixion that opened the way of reconciliation of the world to God. It also seems obvious that they will need to accept Christ as the Risen Lord which will result in them experiencing God’s salvation provided for those who were once dead in their sins and be born from above with the new life from God (life from the dead).

Two Metaphors – 11:16

¹⁶ If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. Romans 11:16 (NASB95)

Paul used two metaphors to provide further understanding of the situation of the similarities and differences between Jews and Gentiles. The first metaphor was related to the practice of offering (dedicating) the first fruits of the harvest to God. This heave offering of dough of the first harvest of grain was symbolic of recognizing that God was the provider of the food and that the rest of the harvest belonged to God even though the people used it for their nourishment. The spiritual application of the first fruits of faith was likely a reference to Abraham who believed (had faith in) God and that was accounted to him as righteousness. All those who had the same faith (as Abraham had) would also be accounted to be righteous. In this metaphor Abraham would be “the first piece of dough” and all who believed as he did would be “the lump.”

The other metaphor was an olive tree. Faithful Abraham would then be the root of the good olive tree and the branches would be the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. These branches would have the same genetic makeup (as the root) and would be what one would expect to find growing on the good olive tree. As A. T. Robertson stated in *NT Word Pictures*, “The metaphor is changed, but the idea is the same. Israel is looked on as a tree. But one must recall and keep in mind the double sense of Israel in 9:6 (the natural and the spiritual).”

Be Humble – 11:17-21

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. Romans 11:17–21 (NASB95)

There are many things that are happening around us and we can be perceptive enough to recognize what is happening. However, we may not know the “why” or the reasons behind what is happening. The Gentile Christians could see from Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree that the unbelieving Jews who rejected Christ were not part of spiritual Israel. It would be as if they had been pruned away or broken off. The Gentile Christians could also see that they had been included (grafted) into spiritual Israel. Paul’s warning against arrogance was to remind them that they did not grow the tree. The “tree” was already there and available for them to be grafted into it and it was not by anything they had done.

Our human nature is such that we want to know a reason for whatever we see. If an explanation is not readily evident, then we will create an explanation from our own imaginations. Apparently, some of the believers took two separate events and created a cause and effect

relationship. It is true that some natural branches were removed and some wild olive branches were grafted in. The reason some branches were removed was not to make room for the grafted branches, but those branches which were removed was because of “unbelief.” Paul went on to remind them that the only reason they (the Gentile background Christians) were part of the tree was because of their faith – the same kind of faith that Abraham had.

This understanding and realization of what had happened to the unbelieving Jews and what they had experience in their belief should have produced a deep sense of humility in these Gentile believers rather than any hint of pride or conceit.

Be Thankful – 11:22-24

²² Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? Romans 11:22–24 (NASB95)

As we continue in these verses (17-27) we can pick out specific phrases that appear to be supportive of a strongly Armenian (free will) interpretation and also others that appear to have a strongly Calvinistic interpretation. It is not likely that both are correct and is probable that both interpretations of these verses are missing the point of Paul’s message. Such confusion can result from approaching a passage with preconceived ideas which will lead the reader to focus on the verses (or phrases) that supports his ideas and ignore verses or phrases that don’t fit the preconceived positions. The problem can be exacerbated by a poor choice of possible English words when translating a passage from the Greek texts.

Our first tendency might be to interpret the idea of “God not sparing you” (end of verse 21) and “you also will be cut off” (end of verse 22) to mean that these Gentile Christians could lose their salvation. Hopefully, we realize that this does not agree with the clear teachings of God’s word in other passages about a Christian losing his or her salvation. Two possibilities come to mind. The first possibility is that Paul was writing about a Christian losing the benefits and blessings of a life that is aligned with God’s plan for his life by becoming separated through failure to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. If we are not following the leading of the Holy Spirit, then being children of God by virtue of the new birth and even being recognized as sons as our position in the family of God, then we will not be able to enjoy the blessings of our “saved” position. The benefits and outcomes are as if you had never been saved.

The second possibility is that Paul may have had in mind people who have only a “historical” faith in Christ. They believe Jesus is Who He says He is. They accept all the “facts” of the revelation that Christ brought to mankind. They even “make a profession” that they believe these facts. They become associated with churches, partake of the ordinances of the church, and are considered by casual observers to be in Christ. Any fruit such “branches” bear withers away and this is the proof that their fruit is not genuine. This non genuine fruit is borne to themselves and not for the glory of God since it does not conform to the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of grace, nor the fruit of righteousness. It could be said that what they bear is the fruit of man’s carnality which is evidenced by pride, ambition, competitiveness, and the need to be in control.

Another way to think about this is that there are two areas where we can “abide” as we live our lives. There is an area entitled “kindness” and the other area is called “severity.” Where does a person choose to dwell? This idea is somewhat an extension of what was taught in Deuteronomy 28. The first fourteen verses (of that chapter) describe the kindness area where

those who abide there enjoy the blessing of God that follows naturally from aligning themselves with God's plans and purposes. The remaining verses of this chapter (15-68) picture the severity area. The Jews were familiar with this teaching and they realized that during the fourteen-hundred-year history of that nation the Israelite had experienced living in both areas.

With the institution of the New Covenant that was ratified by the shed blood of Christ on the Cross, the Gentiles who believed the Gospel were experiencing the "kindness" of God while the Jews who rejected the Gospel were experiencing the severity of God by being excluded from the Israel of God even though they were still part of physical Israel. This situation is in agreement with Paul's statement in Romans 9:6 "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Clearly, the cultivated olive tree is "spiritual Israel" or the "Israel of God" which has its roots in the faith of Abraham. In the New Covenant, the branches of this tree are both natural and grafted.

Those Israelites who rejected God's salvation in Christ are not part of this spiritual olive tree. These are essentially in the same spiritual condition as the Gentiles were before they heard the Gospel and believed unto salvation. In the same way the Gentiles who were lost became eligible to be grafted into the olive tree, those Israelites who had rejected Christ can also be grafted in IF they repent and believe. It really should be easier for those who had a Jewish background to see what God had been doing through Israel to bring the Messiah into the world so that the world (all the people) could be saved. However, many of the Jews just could not see it in the hardness of their hearts and remained separated from the Israel of God.

Be Aware – 11:25-32

²⁵ For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶ and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." ²⁷ "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." ²⁸ From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. ³² For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. Romans 11:25–32 (NASB95)

Paul wrote that some Israelites were blinded or hardened "until" the fullness of the Gentiles entered into the Kingdom of God. The implication that is read into this statement is that after a predetermined number of Gentiles have been saved that all the physical descendants of Abraham (through Isaac and Jacob) would become Christians "automatically." The "automatic" aspect of these conversions is that after the "great and terrible tribulation" that is said to occur after the rapture of the church and immediately before or in conjunction with the Second Advent of Christ that there will be such strong and overwhelming conviction on all the Israelites that they cannot resist believing and thus "all Israel" (meaning physical Israel) will be saved.

The idea that there is a predetermined number of Gentiles who will be saved and once that number is reached that no more will be saved seems rather contrary to what we have learned about the grace of God that "whosoever will" will be saved. The first alternative sounds like Calvinism carried to an extreme. The idea of a strong and overwhelming conviction that Israelites cannot resist believing also seems extreme and might fit the description of irresistible grace.

Is it possible that the traditional translation of this verse might be seen in a different light? For example, the Greek word that is translated "until" is "achris" which can also be rendered as "while" or "even." Using that possibility, we see that verse 25 could be read as follows: "Some

parts of physical Israelites are blinded or hardened ‘even or while’ all (the fullness of) the Gentiles have been allowed to see the truth of the Gospel and to enter into the Kingdom if they will believe.” Notice that Paul is making a contrast of “part” (as applied to the Israelites) and “the fullness” (all) as applied to the Gentiles. The net result is that all those who put their trust in God’s provision of salvation through the completed work of Christ will be saved and it does not matter if they were physical Israelites who believed or Gentiles who believed. The only thing that matters is their faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Without faith no one can be saved.

The good olive tree with the converted branches (Jews) plus the grafted in branches (Gentiles and Jews) make up what is called the “Israel of God.” Thus, ALL Israel will be saved!

Paul quoted from Isaiah that salvation resulted from the Deliverer Who came to Zion and also came out of Zion. Some have advocated that this prophecy is related to the Second Advent of Christ, but it cannot be denied that it was totally fulfilled in the First Advent of Christ. In fact, this Deliverer (in the person of Jesus Christ) was the fulfillment of the Covenant that God made with Abraham and was affirmed to both Isaac and Jacob. It is generally accepted that the ultimate promise of the Covenant was that “through Abraham’s seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed” which is described in the words from Isaiah “when I will take away their sins.”

Starting in verse twenty-eight, Paul returned to the initial argument that God has not rejected the Israelites from participating in the salvation He brought to the world through the Israelites. In other words, the unbelieving Jews who were experiencing blindness were included in the promise (to Abraham) that all nations would be blessed. Their hardness of heart and resulting blindness (that affected some of the Israelites) put them in the same status of the Gentiles who were alienated from God before the Gospel came to them. All have been classified as lost in their disobedience and consequently all could come to salvation by grace through faith – that is the mercy of God.