

Continue in God's Kindness

Romans 11:11-24

Sunday, November 5, 2023

When was the last time you read a book or watched a TV show that made you want to immediately read the next chapter or watch the next episode? What was the last real cliffhanger that sucked you in and left you wanting more? A skilled author or screenwriter knows how to hold our attention so that we can't help but keep watching or continue reading. The key to captive writing is to introduce a problem or a crisis into the story and not resolve the tension until later.

The story the Apostle Paul has been telling about Israel's past, present, and future has unfolded as we've studied Romans chapters 9, 10, and 11. The same could be said of the whole of Paul's letter. Chapter after chapter, Paul has been narrating the grand story of the gospel. And it seems that with each new explanation of the gospel, new questions arise.

If you heard Pastor Jerry's sermon last Sunday, you might remember the last question Paul posed to his readers. It's right there in verse 1 of Romans 11:

“Did God reject his people?” (Rom. 11:1, NIV).

By the end of Romans 10, Paul's Gentile readers might have concluded that God finally had enough with his people, Israel. The picture was of God holding out his hand to Israel offering salvation through Jesus Christ. But as a people, Israel rejected that gift. So the question was posed, since Israel rejected God, did God reject Israel?

In the passage we looked at last week, Paul answered with an emphatic “By no means!” God remained faithful to his people by preserving a remnant. Though small in number, Paul said in verse 5 that

“at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (Rom. 11:5, NIV).

By grace through faith, this tiny remnant was reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. However, a majority of their fellow Israelites did not respond in faith. God hardened the hearts of those who persisted in their unbelief and who rejected his offer of salvation.

The final verses of last Sunday's passage brought us to a cliffhanger moment in the story of Romans. Is this the end of the story for God's people, Israel? Will the Jews ever embrace Jesus? Will they persist in their rebellion? Is Israel's present situation a permanent reality? Tune in next week for the exciting continuation of the next episode of our story!

Let's pick the next part of the story starting in verse 11 of Romans 11 where Paul begins with the cliffhanger question he expects his readers might be asking.

“Again I ask: Did [Israel] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!” (Rom. 11:11–12, NIV).

Did Israel’s rejection of Jesus as their Messiah result in a permanently broken relationship with God? Will their hard-heartedness as a people toward the gospel last forever? Paul answers by saying, “No way!”

To help his readers understand the present situation, Paul pulls back the curtain to allow a look at what God is doing behind the scenes. We might be surprised to see how God’s sovereign grace is at work both among the Jews as well as the Gentiles.

In my study of this passage, I came across a quote from pastor and author John Stott that helped me picture how Paul speaks of God’s hand at work. Stott describes God’s sovereign grace this way:

“The blessing ricochets from Israel to the Gentiles, from the Gentiles back to Israel, and from Israel to the Gentiles again.”¹

I can’t help but picture that little silver ball bouncing around inside of a pinball machine. Once the ball is launched into play, it ricochets from one bumper to the next in seemingly random directions.

But God’s grace isn’t random. Paul tells us that despite sinful human rebellion, God is orchestrating the path of his sovereign grace “from Israel to the Gentiles, from the Gentiles back to Israel, and from Israel to the Gentiles again.”²

In other words, God’s sovereign grace stands behind his temporary hardening of Israel and his present plan for the Gentiles.

Let’s take a closer look at what Paul says in these verses. First, Paul saw God’s sovereign grace at work in that Israel’s rejection of the gospel directly led to an outbreak of gospel ministry among the Gentiles. Paul connects these dots both in verse 11 and in verse 15 where he says

“[Israel’s] rejection brought reconciliation to the [Gentile] world” (Rom. 11:15, NIV).

We can see the divinely directed ricochet of sovereign grace throughout the book of Acts. For example, in Acts 13 when Paul and his ministry team were preaching the gospel in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, there was a mixed reaction to their message.

¹ Stott, John. *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (InterVarsity Press: 1994), p. 295.

² Ibid.

“As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed (Acts 13:42-48, NIV).

At first glance, it might sound like Paul was simply making the best of the situation. If the Jews refused to believe the gospel, perhaps their message would be better received among the Gentiles. But Paul knew that God’s sovereign grace was doing more than just opening a door for the gospel to the Gentiles. Look at Romans 11:13 and following.

“I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them” (Rom. 11:13-14, NIV).

To be clear, it’s not as if Paul was saying, “I’m so glad Israel rejected Jesus so that the Gentiles might come to faith!” Of course not. Think back to the first verses of chapters 9 and 10 where Paul was heartbroken over Israel’s rejection of the gospel.

Paul never viewed Israel’s rejection as a means to an end. What Paul saw was God’s sovereign grace at work. God wasn’t reacting to Israel’s rejection with Plan B by opening the door to the Gentiles. God had been sovereignly orchestrating these moves long before the universe ever existed.

Under the direction of God’s sovereign grace, as more and more Gentiles were coming to faith in Israel’s Messiah, Israel would witness the messianic blessings enjoyed by the Gentiles arising from Christ’s transforming work in them. And that would in turn cause Israel to want what the Gentiles had. Notice that Paul says in verse 11 and again in verse 14 that God was using the salvation of the Gentiles to “make Israel envious” so *that* they might be saved.

I hope you can hear the joy in Paul’s tone as he thinks about how God is working his sovereign grace in the world. Listen again to what Paul exclaims in verse 12.

“But if [Israel’s] transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!” (Rom. 11:12, NIV).

Similarly, Paul says in verse 15,

“For if [Israel’s] rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (Rom. 11:15, NIV).

Paul is almost giddy thinking about what God’s sovereign grace has in store for Israel. Pastor Jerry will say more about what Paul means by Israel’s “full inclusion” in verse 12 next Sunday. For now, let’s retrace Paul’s steps in the first part of this passage and follow the path of the pinball guided by God’s sovereign grace.

Because Israel rejected the gospel, salvation has come to the Gentiles. But God is using the salvation of the Gentiles to make Israel envious and thus draw them back to himself. But if God can use Israel’s hardheartedness to bring great blessing to the Gentiles, wait until we see what God will do when by his sovereign grace many Israelites repent and come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

When we look at the first part of this passage in verses 11-15, we discover a truth about God that should bring us great comfort and encouragement: **God’s sovereign grace stands behind his purpose to redeem a people for himself.**

For weeks, as we’ve worked through Romans chapters 9 through 11, we’ve repeatedly come across this topic of God’s sovereignty. We’ve even wrestled a bit with the apparent tension between God’s sovereign ordering of all things and our human responsibility for how we choose to live. Words like sovereignty, election, predestine, and foreknowledge might raise more questions than they provide us with answers.

But as I reflect on these verses and consider what Paul has to say about God’s sovereign grace, even though I’ll never fully understand it, passages like these lead me to a greater sense of awe and worship.

Typically, when we think of worship, we associate it with praise and singing. Worship is what happens at our Sunday services when we sing hymns of the faith and songs of worship.

Another way we can worship together is by pondering and professing what we believe about God. A good way to do that is by revisiting our church’s Statement of Faith.

You may not have noticed this before, but Article 1 of our EFCA Statement of Faith speaks to the truth we’re discovering about God from Romans 11—God’s sovereign grace stands behind his purposes to redeem a people for himself.

We're going to put Article 1 on the screen for us and I would like to invite you to read aloud together what we profess to believe about God.

“We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.”

You see, Romans 11 doesn't just answer the question, “Is this the end of the story for Israel? Is Israel's hardheartedness permanent?” Romans 11 teaches us that **God's sovereign grace stands behind his purpose to redeem a people for himself.**

But what does it look like for God to redeem a people for himself? Paul addresses that question in verses 16-24 by picturing God as a master gardener.

Olive trees were extremely common in the Mediterranean world in which Paul lived and ministered. But the olive tree was also a common symbol for God's people, Israel. For example, the prophet Jeremiah writes of Israel,

“The LORD called you a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form” (Jer. 11:16a, NIV).

But notice again in Romans 11:13 who Paul was addressing in this passage:

“I am talking to you Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13a, NIV).

Why would Paul use a Jewish metaphor for Israel when addressing Gentile Christians? In verses 16-24, Paul wants his readers to see that **God's sovereign grace is grafting believing Jews and Gentiles into one olive tree—one redeemed people of God.**

At first, Paul mixes his metaphors. In verse 16 Paul begins by comparing Israel with a batch of dough but then switches his picture to that of the olive tree. In both cases, Paul's point is that Israel's identity as God's chosen people has not changed. What God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has not been permanently lost. However, as Paul has been saying throughout Romans, one's ethnic identity, whether Jew or Gentile, is in itself no guarantee of one's righteous standing before God.

The olive tree symbolizes the unified people of God without respect to ethnicity. That's not to say that God disregards the distinction between Jew and Gentile. As we'll see in this part of the passage, there is a distinction between the natural branches that have been broken off (unbelieving Israelites) and the wild olive shoots that are grafted in (Gentile believers).

Let's revisit Paul's olive tree metaphor in verses 17-24 so we can follow his line of thinking. In verse 17, Paul explains,

“[S]ome of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root” (Rom. 11:17, NIV).

In many ways, Paul's illustration is simply a way to picture what Paul described back in verse 11. Many Israelites rejected their Messiah and the message of the gospel, and thus are like natural branches of the olive tree that have been broken off. By God's sovereign grace, many Gentiles responded in faith to the gospel, trusting in Israel's Messiah, and were thus grafted into the olive tree of God's people. At this point in salvation history, the olive tree represents Jewish Christians who placed their faith in Jesus Christ (the remnant) and Gentile believers whom God has grafted in. God's sovereign grace is grafting believing Jews and Gentiles into one olive tree—one redeemed people of God.

Unfortunately, many of Paul's Gentile readers didn't see it this way. Some within the church in Rome had misinterpreted Jewish unbelief and Gentile inclusion as God replacing the old people of God with an entirely new one. Paul summarized their shortsighted interpretation in verse 19.

“You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either” (Rom. 11:19-21, NIV).

The first College Football Playoff rankings came out this past Tuesday. I won't mention which team was ranked number one, but if you know, you know. But every year it's the same debate. Who deserves to be in the playoffs? Who should be left out? Whose resume warrants a top-four ranking? Who has more quality wins? I'll admit that top-ranked teams and their loyal fans can become quite arrogant over the “who's the best of the best” debate.

Notice Paul's warning in verse 18 and again in verse 20:

“Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. ...Do not be arrogant, but tremble” (Rom. 11:18a, 20b, NIV).

Tremble.³ Fear.⁴ Beware.⁵ Stand in awe.⁶

³ Rom. 11:20, NIV

⁴ Rom. 11:20, ESV (2007)

⁵ Rom. 11:20, CSB

⁶ Rom. 11:20, ESV (2001)

Paul's warning to those first-century Gentile believers extends to us today.

Our inclusion into the redeemed community by God's sovereign grace should lead us to reverent worship and persevering faith.

Whether one belongs to the olive tree as a natural branch or a branch that has been grafted in, we belong to the people of God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Commenting on this passage, the 16th-century theologian John Calvin explains,

“This fear, therefore of which [Paul] speaks is set up as an antidote to proud contempt, because as all men claim more for themselves than is right, become too off-hand, and in the end grow insolent towards others, so we ought to that extent to be fearful lest our heart should be inflated with pride and exalt itself.”⁷

Paul concludes this passage with a charge to his readers in verse 22.

“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off” (Rom. 11:22, NIV).

On what basis does an olive branch, whether natural or wild, whether Jew or Gentile—on what basis does a branch belong to the olive tree, the people of God? Solely on the basis of faith in Christ alone.

Just as Paul warned the Jews back in Romans 2 not to presume they belonged to people of God by virtue of their ethnicity, so too was Paul warning the Gentiles not to presume they belonged simply because God had opened a door for the Gentiles to come in. Therefore, Paul called upon his readers to “continue in [God's] kindness” (Rom. 11:22, NIV).

Throughout church history, Christians have referred to this idea of continuing in God's kindness as the *perseverance of the saints*. On the one hand, the Scriptures encourage us that all who have truly placed their faith in Christ *will* be saved. Jesus himself promised,

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28, NIV).

⁷ Torrance, David W. and Thomas F. Torrance, eds., *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians, A New Translation*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (1960), p. 250.

On the other hand, Scripture also warns its readers that only those who have *truly* placed their faith in Christ will be saved. As Paul similarly warned the Corinthian church,

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Cor. 13:5, NIV).

We’re given these warnings not to cast doubt on our faith, but to ensure that our faith is in the right place—to ensure that our only confidence is Christ alone and in his salvation.

We’ve got two more Sundays ahead of us to finish up Romans 11. As we’ve worked through this middle section together this morning I hope that you’ve been able to see two important truths.

First, **God’s sovereign grace stands behind his purpose to redeem a people for himself.** Though we may not be able to fully see the plans that God has for his people, we know God’s sovereign grace stands behind his temporary hardening of Israel and his present plan for the Gentiles.

But second, Scripture tells us that God’s sovereign grace is grafting believing Jews and Gentiles into one olive tree—one redeemed people of God. As we’ll see next Sunday, exactly how the master gardener chooses to work is a bit of a mystery. And yet, Scripture teaches us that **our inclusion into the redeemed community by God’s sovereign grace should lead us to reverent worship and persevering faith.**

May we be a church that trusts and celebrates the sovereign grace of God through Jesus Christ.