

DO
NOT
CONFIRM
BE TRANS-
FORMED

THE BOOK OF ROMANS
PART THREE

NOVEMBER 2024

ROMANS

Part III: Chapters 9–16

Do Not Conform. Be Transformed.

Commentary by Andrew Forrest

ASBURY

START HERE

The key to understanding Paul’s Letter to the Romans is to remember *that it is an actual letter written to actual people in an actual place.*

So, here’s what we can reconstruct about the social setting of the Roman church when they received Paul’s letter, around A.D. 57:

Initially, the Roman church was made up of Jewish Christian believers. We believe Jewish Christians from Jerusalem—missionaries like the Apostle Peter—shared the gospel in Roman synagogues and made converts. But sometime during the reign of Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–53), the Jews were expelled from Rome.

The Book of Acts references that event:

*‘After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because, **Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.** And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks [Acts 18:1–4].*

Interestingly, it seems that the reason for the expulsion was a disagreement in the synagogues about Jesus. This is how the ancient Roman historian Suetonius puts it in a work that dates from the early 100s:

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [the Emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome.

It seems clear that “Chrestus” is a misspelling of “Christ.” So, a disagreement in the Jewish community in Rome between Jewish Christians and Jewish non-Christians caused Emperor Claudius to expel *all* the Jews—both believers and non-believers—from Rome.

But the Gospel remained behind when the Jews left, and Gentile believers started becoming Christians. Claudius died in A.D. 54, and sometime after that the Jews were allowed to return to Rome. When the

Jewish Christians returned, they found Gentile Christians were now part of the Roman church. In fact, from context clues in Paul's letter itself, it seems that from that point on the Gentile Christians made up the majority of the Roman church, the Jewish Christians the minority.

In Romans 9–16, Paul is addressing the tension in the Roman church between the Gentile Christian majority and the Jewish Christian minority.

In chapters 1–8, Paul has explained his message and the foundation of the Gospel: both Jews and Gentiles need to be saved and are saved in the same way—through trust in Jesus, who died and rose again. In the back half of his letter, Paul will build on that foundation as he specifically addresses the situation in the Roman church between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians.

The question to keep in mind as we read through chapters 9–16:

How does what Paul is saying here relate to the tension in the Roman church between the Gentile Christian majority and the Jewish Christian minority?

CHAPTERS 9–11

First, we will look at chapters 9–11. These three chapters make up one unified, technically complex section, filled with Old Testament allusions and quotations. We will take our time working through this section, and we will see that Paul is examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
 2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God replaced the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
 3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
 4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*
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CHAPTERS 12–15

For eleven chapters, Paul has been explaining what the gospel is and what it means for both Jews and Gentiles. In the final section of his letter (chapters 12–15), he brings it all home with pastoral counsel and advice.

In light of everything I've been saying, now this is what the Christian life should look like as you follow Jesus in unity in Rome....

This final section is the easiest part of the letter to understand but the hardest to put into practice, since it is instruction on how to actually live and love other people in the way of Jesus.

CHAPTER 16

The final chapter appears at first glance to be mainly a list of names of people that Paul is mentioning with specific greetings. But, as we shall see, in some ways these names are the most interesting part of the letter, as they are reflective of the amazing cultural diversity of the Roman church—the names are Greek (Gentile) names, Latin (Gentile) names, and Jewish names. And all these people are unified in Christ!

WHY I WRITE THESE COMMENTARIES

Asbury is a Bible-reading church—we teach people to read and love the Bible. But I know that for people to actually read and love God's Word, they first have to understand it, and so I write these commentaries as a pastor who is trying to help his people get the most they can out of the Bible.

I pray that God will use the words and pages that follow to that end.



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November 2024

P.S. Want to receive these daily readings and commentary each weekday morning in your inbox? Sign up on my website: andrewforrest.org.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1

ROMANS 9:1-5

WHY DIDN'T MORE JEWS BELIEVE IN JESUS?

9 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Sometime around A.D. 57 Paul sent the letter we now call Romans to the network of house churches in Rome that together made up the Roman church. The Resurrection of Jesus took place in either A.D. 30 or A.D. 33 (either of those two dates is possible), and in the first few years after the Resurrection, the church was primarily made up of Jewish Christians, i.e., people who had a Jewish background before they believed in Jesus. But as the Gospel spread around the Mediterranean—and the Apostle Paul was one of the missionaries and church planters who was most responsible for its spread—the church became more and more Gentile. As the decades went on, fewer and fewer Jews were coming to faith in Christ. When Paul sent his letter, the Roman church was made up of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, but there was some tension between the two groups, and it's likely that at the time Paul was writing that the Gentile Christians had come to make up a majority of the Roman church.

It seems that in the Roman church, the Gentile Christians were feeling superior to the Jewish Christians because so many of the Jewish people had failed to recognize Jesus as Messiah. In light of this fact, the Roman Gentile Christians believed that perhaps God has abandoned His chosen people and that they—the Gentiles—were the new chosen people: they had superseded—replaced—Israel.

Paul is going to spend the next three chapters dealing the following questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

Paul himself was a Jewish Christian, and the failure of so many of his people to recognize Jesus as Messiah was a source of pain for Paul:

² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh [Romans 9:2–3].

What happened? **Why didn't more Jews believe in Jesus?** God chose the family of Abraham—Israel—to be His chosen people; the Old Testament is the account of how God worked through Israel:

⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen [Romans 9:4–5].

So, despite being the chosen people and having all the privileges and blessings of hearing directly from God (!), despite being the people from whom the Messiah came (!), the Jews in Paul's day missed recognizing Jesus as Messiah. Why? What does their blindness to the Gospel mean? Did God forsake His people? Was God unfaithful to His promises to Israel? Have the Jews been replaced by the Gentiles? In chapters 9–11, Paul will give an answer.

An overview of Paul's answer: No, the Jews have not been replaced by the Gentiles; rather, God is working His plan of salvation, and throughout history God has used certain people at certain times for the larger purpose of bringing salvation to all who will receive it. If the majority of the Jews are rejecting Jesus, somehow their rejection is being used by God to be part of His overall salvation plan, but His promises to Israel are still valid and will be forever—He has not given up on Abraham's family.

In the meantime, I think it's worth thinking through the idea of privilege in our lives. Paul lists all the privileges that the Jews enjoyed, and yet they missed Jesus.

What are we doing with what we have been given?

We know the Gospel—are we living as if we know it?

We have the Gospel—are we doing anything with it?

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4

ROMANS 9:6-29

THE ISRAEL WITHIN ISRAEL

⁶But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— ¹²she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Previously we read about the grief and sorrow Paul has experienced because so few of the Jews—his own flesh and blood!—have accepted Jesus as Messiah, despite the fact that they have the amazing privilege of being God's chosen people.

Does this mean that God's promises to Israel have failed? Paul's answer? NO.

Why?

Paul points out that there were always two “Israels” within Abraham's family—the people literally (biologically) descended from Abraham, and then the ones God chose to use in a certain way for His salvation purposes. There is an Israel within Israel, so to speak:

^{6b} For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring [Romans 9:6b–8].

There is an Israel *within* Israel, and so God is not unfaithful to His promises when He chooses this or that person to play an important role in salvation history. Yes, Ishmael is descended from Abraham as well as Isaac, but God chose Isaac—the child of promise, of faith—to be the one He would work through; Esau is descended from Abraham just like Jacob is descended from Abraham, but God chose Jacob to be the one He would work through, this despite the fact that the boys were *twins* and unlike Isaac and Ishmael, came from the same mother. Moreover, Jacob was the *younger* brother. And on top of that, God chose to work through Jacob even before he was born—when she was pregnant, Rebekah their mother was told:

¹² *The older will serve the younger* [Romans 9:12].

In other words, the fact that God chose to work through Jacob’s line had nothing to do with Jacob *deserving* to be chosen—rather, God just chose Jacob according to God’s own mysterious (mysterious from a human point of view, that is) purposes.

This is why the above matters:

Paul’s argument should matter to us is because he is making a very simple but profound point: God can choose how He will work through human history. When He picks Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau, He is working according to his deep purposes. In the Bible, this concept is called **election**.

Election is the idea that God chooses to work in particular and specific ways, and through particular and specific groups of people. The Lord did not choose Israel to be the chosen people because they were somehow better than the other nations; He chose them as an act of grace. Israel didn’t choose God, God chose Israel. The elect are those who find themselves chosen by God to play an important role in God’s plan—in

the Old Testament, Israel is the chosen nation, the elect. When God singled out Abraham to play an important part in salvation history, that was always God’s prerogative. To be singled out to play an important part does not mean you are any better than anyone else.

As we shall see, Paul is not saying that people have no choice in the matter—people can and do choose how they will respond to God’s choosing of them. Will they respond to His gracious invitation with faith, or with hard hearts? And, the ones chosen by God to play a part in salvation history—“the elect”—is a group that is continually being added to. In fact (and Paul will explain this in Romans 11), Paul believes that it’s not too late for the unbelieving Jews, and that some of them will come to put their faith in Jesus before the end.

But, in this section, Paul’s overall point is simple:

Just because *right now* the majority of the descendants of Abraham have failed to believe in the Messiah is not something new that God is doing; God is not a liar—it has *always* been the case that God was working through only one part of the descendants of Abraham.

In the same way, none of us chose the circumstances or timing of our birth. Why were we born when or where we were born, to those particular parents? The answer is known only to God. What Paul is reminding the Romans here is that God doesn’t work in ways that immediately make sense to the world.

Is this unfair? That’s the question Paul will tackle next.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 5

ROMANS 9:14–18

IS GOD UNFAIR?

¹⁴What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. ¹⁷For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” ¹⁸So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Chapters 9–11 make up one unified, technically complex section, filled with Old Testament allusions and quotations. As we work through this section, we will see that Paul is examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
 2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
 3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
 4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*
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HAVE THE GENTILES REPLACED THE JEWS AS THE CHOSEN PEOPLE?

At the time Paul is writing his letter, most of the people who are becoming Christians are Gentiles, not Jews, and in the Roman church some of the Gentile Christians were implying that the Jews were no longer the chosen people. In our previous days' readings, Paul has lamented the failure of so many of his Jewish brethren to come to faith in Jesus, but he has said that this failure does not mean that *God* has failed. Using the Old Testament, Paul has shown that it has always been the case that God has chosen to use merely one part of Abraham's family.

Is it unfair for God to single out certain people to play specific roles in salvation history?

Paul's answer: *By no means!* [v 9:14b]

Paul then uses the example of Moses and Pharaoh to make his point.

The very first thing the Israelites did after the Lord made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai was to make a golden calf and worship it! One would think that this would mean the end of their relationship with the Lord, but surprisingly, the Lord continued to be faithful to Israel. In fact, when Moses presses the Lord on this point, the Lord replies,

¹⁵ *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion* [Romans 9:15, referencing Exodus 33:19].

As Paul points out, God even uses Pharaoh—of all people—as part of His plan of salvation. The point of the Pharaoh example is that hard hearts can be used by God to bring other people to saving faith—just as God previously used Pharaoh’s refusal to relent to bring salvation to the Hebrews, so now God is using the hard hearts of the Jews to bring salvation to the Gentiles. (But we are getting ahead of ourselves—Paul hasn’t gotten there yet.)

¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills [Romans 9:18].

If you take this verse out of context, it at first seems that God is deliberately hardening the hearts of the Jews so that they will NOT believe. But, as we shall see, this is not the point Paul is making. (The problem is that we have to read his entire argument in chapters 9–11 to get his overall point.)

1. Paul will go on to explain in chapter 11 that even Jews who initially rejected Jesus are capable of later changing their minds and coming to faith in Him. **Paul is not here talking about God making someone *permanently* incapable of repenting and responding to the Gospel.**
2. For another thing, the example of Pharaoh is complicated. In Exodus, the Lord continually reaches out to Pharaoh and gives him chance after chance to repent. Finally, and tragically, Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to repent *but God even uses Pharaoh’s refusal for His salvation purposes.*

The point Paul is making here is that God shows mercy in surprising ways!

We’ll have to read on to see how this applies to the question, *Have the Gentiles replaced the Jews as the chosen people?*

In the meantime, don’t give up hope today—God’s mercy often comes in surprising ways and places. Keep praying. Whatever the result of the election, do not assume you know how God is at work.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6

ROMANS 9:19–24

GOD WILL CHANGE HIS PLANS IN RESPONSE TO HUMAN ACTIONS

¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

Today’s commentary will be crucial to our understanding of everything Paul is saying. If you miss Paul’s allusion to Jeremiah 18, you will end up drawing the wrong conclusions from Romans 9–11.

We are in the midst of a technical and complicated argument Paul is making in chapters 9–11 as he examines and answers four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
 2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
 3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
 4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*
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At the time Paul is writing the majority of the Jews—Paul’s own people!—have rejected Jesus, while more and more Gentiles are coming to faith. This would seem to imply that God has abandoned His people. Paul is explaining why this is not the case.

In our previous reading, we've seen how Paul has explained that sometimes God uses certain people for His salvation purposes. The implication (which Paul will specifically state many times in his letter, e.g., Romans 11:15) is that God is currently using Israel's *refusal to accept the Messiah* as part of His plan.

So, Paul anticipates someone objecting to his point:

"If God is using Israel's refusal to accept Jesus as part of his plan, then how can God possibly hold Israel accountable for that refusal?"

¹⁹ *You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" [Romans 9:19].*

Paul's answer: Are you kidding me? Who are you to possibly assume you know better than God?

¹⁹ *You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"* ²⁰ *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"* ²¹ *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? [Romans 9:19–21].*

You cannot understand this passage unless you know the Old Testament allusions and "hyperlinks" behind it.

In the background here is Isaiah 29:16:

¹⁶ *You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker,
"He did not make me";
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
"He has no understanding"?*

As well as Isaiah 45:9:

⁹ *Woe to him who strives with him who formed him,
a pot among earthen pots!
Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?'
or 'Your work has no handles'?*

The point Isaiah is making (and to which Paul is alluding) is that as the creatures, who are we to question the Creator? The Roman Gentile Christians were lording it over the Jewish Christians, assuming that the Gentiles had become the new chosen people, replacing Israel. After all—they might have said—if Israel is still the chosen nation, then why aren't more Jews becoming believers in Jesus as Messiah? Paul has no patience for this kind of thing—if God wants to choose to bring in the Gentiles, then so be it. Who are we to question?

But Paul goes further and makes an even more explicit Old Testament allusion:

²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? [Romans 9:21–24].

Here, Paul is referencing the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who was instructed by God to go and pay a visit to a potter. It is vital that we closely read the Jeremiah passage or else we will miss what Paul is doing in Romans 9–11.

¹ The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² “Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do [Jeremiah 18:1–4].

First, Jeremiah goes to visit the potter, and he sees that, as the potter is working, one of the pottery dishes becomes messed up, so he reworks the clay and turns it into something else.

Having shown Jeremiah this lesson, God speaks to him concerning His providential purposes:

⁵ Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶ “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it [Jeremiah 18:5–8].

There are two crucial points here:

1. God is within His rights to pronounce judgment and destruction on a disobedient nation (specifically Israel, in this case);
2. BUT IF THAT NATION, UNDER GOD'S JUDGMENT, THEN REPENTS AND CHANGES ITS WAYS, GOD WILL RELENT AND FORBEAR RELEASING THE DESTRUCTION HE HAD PREVIOUSLY INTENDED.

To make the point even more explicit, God continues His lesson to Jeremiah:

⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds’ [Jeremiah 18:9–11].

Now, God makes the related but opposite point to that above:

1. If God has promised blessing and life to a nation because of its obedience,
2. But if that nation then subsequently turns from life and begins to follow after evil, THEN GOD WILL CHANGE HIS PLANS FROM BLESSING TO DESTRUCTION.

Friends, this is one of the most important points Paul has made so far in all of Romans, and the meaning is as clear as day:

God's desire is blessing, and if people who are under judgment subsequently repent, God will change His plans and bring blessing, but if people who are under blessing subsequently begin to do evil, God will change His plans and bring destruction.

IN OTHER WORDS, GOD WILL CHANGE HIS PLANS DEPENDING ON WHETHER PEOPLE ARE OBEDIENT OR DISOBEIDENT, DO GOOD OR DO EVIL.

This is the plain sense of Jeremiah 18:1–11. God is warning Judah (Judah is the only surviving tribe of Israel at the point Jeremiah is prophesying, which is roughly around 600 B.C.) that, though the people have been disobedient, and that destruction is coming, it is not too late to change direction, and if they change, then God will change His plan.

With all that in the background, let's look again what Paul is arguing in vv. 19–24:

¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? [Romans 9:19–24].

God is the potter, shaping history. If the chosen people are now hard-hearted toward the Messiah, then God—who has been extremely patient with the Jews (*has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction*)—has simply moved to share His mercy in a place where it will be received, namely the Gentile nations. The very fact that God is bringing in the Gentiles is a both a sign of his mercy—Paul calls the Gentile Christians *vessels of mercy* [v. 23]—and a confirmation of the warning that the prophets gave to Israel long ago, namely that their hard hearts would leave God no choice but to give them over to judgment.

Paul's point in all of this is this: “No, God hasn't abandoned Israel—He warned them for centuries and finally now God has decided to work in a new way and bring in the Gentiles. But, if Israel were to repent, He'd pour out mercy on them, too.”

This is a heavy message, both terrifying and encouraging. We American Christians need to remember:

1. God is expecting us to stay faithful and not presume we can abandon the Lord and escape the consequences of our apostasy.
2. But it is also not too late for anyone to turn in repentance to the Lord—God is eagerly offering every person the chance to receive mercy and move from death to life.

How seriously do you need to take #1? How seriously do you need to pray for point #2?

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7
ROMANS 9:25–29
 GOD IS WORKING THE LONG GAME

²⁵As indeed he says in Hosea,

“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’
 and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”

²⁶“And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’
 there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

²⁷And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, ²⁸for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” ²⁹And as Isaiah predicted,

“If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
 we would have been like Sodom
 and become like Gomorrah.”

Throughout this whole section, Paul has been dealing with four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

There are more Old Testament quotations in Romans 9–11 than in the whole rest of the letter, and here Paul offers a few more.

First, from Hosea, Paul makes a point about the Gentiles:

²⁵ *Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’
and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”*

²⁶ *“And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’
there they will be called ‘sons of the living God’” [Romans 9:25–26].*

Paul uses the quotation from Hosea to make the point that the Lord was always planning to bring in people into His family who were originally outsiders, so Paul wants the Romans to understand that the inclusion of the Gentiles shouldn’t be shocking.

Second, from Isaiah, Paul makes a point about the Jews:

²⁷ *And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of
Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,²⁸ for
the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without
delay.”²⁹ And as Isaiah predicted,*

*“If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah” [Romans 9:27–29].*

Just as the Old Testament prophets has said that the Lord would one day bring in the Gentiles, Paul also reminds the Roman church that the Lord had warned the Jews that there would be consequences for unbelief:

1. In 9:27 Paul quotes Isaiah to make the point that just because there are lots of people related to Abraham does not mean they will all be saved; rather, only the small (faithful) number will be saved;
2. In 9:29 Paul quotes Isaiah to make the point that, even if the majority of Israel rejects the Messiah, nevertheless there will still be a faithful remnant.

Paul’s point is just to explain to the Roman church that the inclusion of the believing Gentiles and the exclusion of unbelieving Jews was already foretold in Scripture.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8

ROMANS 9:30–33

SO, WHAT HAPPENED? WHY DIDN'T THE JEWS BELIEVE?

³⁰ What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written,

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Chapters 9–11 make up one unified, technically complex section, filled with Old Testament allusions and quotations. As we work through this section, we see that Paul is examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

Paul has been explaining to the Romans that the Old Testament prophets foretold that God would one day bring in the Gentiles and that unbelieving Israel would face consequences for that unbelief. In today's reading, Paul is breaking it down even further by answering the question:

So, what happened? Why didn't the Jews believe?

³⁰ *What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; [Romans 9:30].*

Well, says Paul, believe it or not the Gentiles (of all people)—the Gentiles who didn't even have the Law and had no idea what

righteousness really meant—the *Gentiles* have actually now become righteous because of their faith—their trust—in Jesus.

In contrast:

³¹ *but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law* [Romans 9:31].

The Jews—who had been actually instructed by God and had the Law—missed what God is doing. Here’s why:

³² *Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame”* [Romans 9:32-33].

Paul says that the Jews are missing the key aspect of relationship with God, i.e., they are failing to trust, to have faith. In fact, they have tripped up over Jesus!

^{32b} *They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame”* [Romans 9:32b-33].

Jesus is the stumbling block; because the Jews were unwilling to accept Him as Messiah, they have completely missed what God is doing. Anyone who believes in Jesus will be saved, but if you refuse to believe in Jesus because He doesn’t conform to your expectations, you will trip up and fall.

“Who is Jesus?” You have to answer that question one way or the other—to not answer it by trying to avoid it is still answering it.

How would you answer that question today?

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11

ROMANS 10:1-4

THE JEWS MISSED THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

10 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness

of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Remember, it seems that some of the Roman Gentile Christians had come to believe that God was replacing the Jews as His chosen people with the Gentiles as His chosen people, and so Paul is giving a long, complicated response to that issue.

Here, he says that he really wants the unbelieving Jews to be saved.

¹*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved [Romans 10:1].*

The reason the Jews aren't believing is not because they don't care, but that they care about the wrong things:

²*For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness [Romans 10:2–3].*

The Jews had the Law of God, and they thought this made them superior to the Gentiles, but when the Messiah came in a way different than their expectations, they missed Him. Israel's problem is that they missed the forest for the trees—they were “zealous” but not for the right cause. Think of the Pharisees, arguing with the Son of God and totally missing Him. The Jews were so concerned with the Law that they were unable to see that:

⁴*Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes [Romans 10:4].*

This is a beautiful, profound point. The Greek word *telos* means “end” as in “The End” at the end of a movie, and it also means “goal” as in the phrase “the ends justify the means.” So, Paul means two things here:

1. Christ is the goal of the Law, its destination—everything was always moving toward a culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.
2. Christ is the *final* act of the Law. As Paul has already said in Romans 8:2–4, the death and resurrection of Jesus fulfilled the Law's purpose once and for all so that now we live in the freedom and life that the Law was always meant to bring.

Paul's point: the Jews have missed seeing that in Christ God didn't abandon the Law, He *fulfilled* it and brought it to its completion.

Be careful not to miss Jesus today.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 12

ROMANS 10:5-13

HOW DOES A PERSON BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Throughout chapters 9–11, Paul is examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

In our previous day's reading (vv. 10:1–4), Paul has explained that Jesus

as Messiah was a difficult concept for the Jews to accept; many of them “stumbled” over Jesus and consequently missed the life that He came to bring.

Here, Paul makes the point that the Old Testament had said that if you want life, you have to obediently follow the Law:

⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them [Romans 10:5].

The problem (as Paul has explained in chapters 1–7) is that no one was actually able to follow the Law. But the good news is that though no one else was able to perfectly keep the Law; Jesus Himself perfectly followed it and, though He died in place of disobedient Israel, God raised Him from the dead; through His obedience Jesus now offers the blessings of the Law to all who trust in Him. Paul calls this “the righteousness based on faith” (v. 6).

And then Paul explains that faith is trusting that God has already done in Christ what needed to be done—we don’t have to do it:

⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead) [Romans 10:6–7].

In other words, there is no need to try and bring Christ down from heaven, since He has already made that journey, and there is no need to try and descend into the place of the dead—that is, “the abyss”—to raise up God’s people, since Jesus has already descended to the dead and ascended to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, holding in his hand the keys of death and Hades (Revelation 1:18).

No, there is no need to do any of that, because Christ has already done it. Rather, all you have to do is *trust*:

⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing

his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [Romans 10:8–13].

- You just need to trust—have faith in—Jesus;
- This faith is both an internal decision to trust Jesus (“believe in your heart”) and an external action that conforms to the internal decision (“confess with your mouth”);
- ***Anyone who trusts in Jesus will be saved;***
- And there is one salvation for both Jews and Gentiles—everyone is saved by the same way—by faith.

Have you placed your trust in Jesus by internal decision—belief in your heart—and external action—confession with your mouth?

Who around you can you lead to Christ in this way? Be praying for the opportunity.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 13

ROMANS 10:14–21

DID THE JEWS NOT KNOW ABOUT JESUS?

¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the Gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

¹⁸ But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for
“Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.”

¹⁹ But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,
“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.”

²⁰ Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,
“I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.”

²¹ But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

Paul begins by making the point that unless the Gospel is shared with the Jews, then there is no way they could respond to the news:

¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” [Romans 10:14–15].

Unfortunately, the Jews just haven’t listened:

¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the Gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ [Romans 10:16–17].

And they haven’t listened, even though, speaking with hyperbole, Paul says, “everyone has heard about Jesus, so it’s not like it’s a secret:”

*¹⁸ But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for
“Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world” [Romans 10:18].*

So, did the Jews not *understand* the Gospel? Why haven’t more Jews accepted Christ?

*¹⁹ But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,
“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry” [Romans 10:19].*

Paul says that God seems to be using the Gentiles to get the attention of Israel—if the Gentiles believe in Jesus as Messiah, shouldn’t this provoke Israel to faith?

And, once again, Paul makes the point that the Old Testament prophets foretold that God was planning all along to bring in the Gentiles:

*²⁰ Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,
“I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” [Romans 10:20].*

But why haven't more Jews believed? Well, Paul says it is because they are being disobedient and hard-hearted:

²¹ But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people" [Romans 10:21].

In our time, many parts of the Muslim world are totally unreached by the Gospel. Pray today that the Lord would raise up missionaries that will go share the good news in those places.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14

ROMANS 11:1-10

SOME OF THE JEWS WERE SPIRITUALLY BLIND

11 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ³ "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." ⁴ But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

⁷ What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸ as it is written,

"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day."

⁹ And David says,

"Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;
¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and bend their backs forever."

Remember, throughout this whole long, complicated section, filled with

Old Testament allusions and quotations, we see that Paul is examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

Paul begins our section today once again stating his certainty that God has not given up on the Jews:

¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew [Romans 11:1–2].

Paul makes the point that it's not as if none of the Jews have accepted Christ, and he puts himself forward as a prime example to prove his point—Paul, after all, was Jewish.

No, “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.” (v. 2)

Note the word “foreknew” here. In the context it cannot mean “those whom God already predestined for belief” because Paul is obviously talking here about Jews who have NOT believed. When Paul uses that word here and in Romans 8:29, he simply means “the people God has already known” or “known for a long time in the past.”

Paul then references the Old Testament story of Elijah (1 Kings 19:18) to make the point that God always has a remnant of faithful people. (I find this point very encouraging.)

²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ³“Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” ⁴But what is God's reply to him? “I have kept for

myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace [Romans 10:2–6].

There are *some* Jews that have believed, and it’s not that they earned their salvation; rather, their salvation is a gift of God.

Then Paul goes on to cite some Old Testament verses to make the point that although the elect—the ones who believe—have responded in faith to Messiah Jesus, the rest have been blind and unable to see what’s right in front of them.

⁷ What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened,⁸ as it is written,

*“God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.”*

⁹ And David says,

*“Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;
¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and bend their backs forever” [Romans 11:7–10].*

Way back in Romans 1, Paul told us that one of the consequences of sin is spiritual blindness. Therefore, an important prayer to pray for unbelievers is that the Lord would open their eyes to the truth.

For whom do you need to be praying today?

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15 **ROMANS 11:11–24**

IS IT TOO LATE FOR UNBELIEVING JEWS?

¹¹ So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle

to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

Remember that chapters 9–11 make up one unified, technically complex section, filled with Old Testament allusions and quotations. As we work through this section, we see that Paul is examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

So, in today's reading Paul asks, *Is it too late for the unbelieving Jews?* Has their "stumbling" by missing the Gospel mean that they are going to permanently fall away from salvation?

¹¹ *So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall?* [Romans 11:11].

Paul gives a two-part answer to the question:

1. No, it's not too late for the Jews!
2. And by the way, the Jewish refusal to accept the Messiah has meant that God has moved to bring in the Gentiles—an amazing act of God; so, along the same lines, if Jewish refusal brings in the Gentiles, can you imagine how great it will be when the Jews finally accept the Messiah?!

¹¹ *So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!* [Romans 11:11–12].

Paul's primary mission has become a mission to the Gentiles, and here Paul talks about that:

¹³Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them [Romans 11:13–14].

His point is that he hopes that the success of his ministry to the Gentiles will actually get the Jews' attention and cause them to reconsider and then believe in Jesus as Messiah. Note that Paul is here talking about saving unbelieving Jews who have previously rejected Jesus.

Verse 14 is proof, therefore, that just because someone has rejected Jesus previously does not mean that it is too late for that person.

Remember the amazing message of Jeremiah 18 (which Paul has explicitly referenced in Romans 9 but that is in the background of this entire section of chapters 9–11):

⁵Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds’ [Jeremiah 18:5–11].

The point of the Jeremiah passage is that God will respond to people according to their willingness or their refusal to repent:

1. If they repent and turn from disobedience toward obedience, then God will change His plan of destruction to a plan of blessing;
2. If they turn from obedience toward evil, then God will change His plan of blessing to a plan of destruction.

In 11:14, Paul is specifically referring to the possibility of future salvation for Jews who have previously rejected Christ. In other words, it is never ever too late, and God’s desire is that people turn and repent. **From a reading of Romans 9–11 that takes into account the entirety of Paul’s long, technical, and complicated argument, I believe that we cannot come to the conclusion that God has previously decreed—“predestined” that some people will be saved and others will be damned.** You may disagree and I respect and expect disagreement, but you better be ready to back up your argument with support from chapters 9–11!

¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches [Romans 11:15–16].

Once again, Paul holds out hope that, if God has used the rejection of the Jews in order to bring in the Gentiles, then shouldn’t we expect something great to happen if and when the Jews finally come to faith?!

Because the synagogues slammed the door in the apostles’ faces, so to speak, the apostles turned to the Gentiles who were open to the message about Jesus. But Paul holds out hope that, because some Jews have believed—he calls these Jewish Christians “the firstfruits” (v.16)—who knows that, in the end, the rest might also believe?

Don’t you ever give up hope for anyone.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18

ROMANS 11:17–24

WHY “ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED” IS SLOPPY THEOLOGY

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not

become proud, but fear. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²²Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. ²³And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

The Roman church to which Paul is writing was made up of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and most likely the Gentile Christians were in the majority. Throughout this whole long, complicated section, filled with Old Testament allusions and quotations, Paul has been examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

Paul here is directly addressing the Gentile Romans Christians, and he tells them not to get puffed up and think they are any better than the unbelieving Jews, just because God has graciously “grafted” them into His covenant people.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you [Romans 11:17–18].

The image is of an olive tree in an orchard, with the olive grower grafting in wild branches into the cultivated tree. The life comes from the root; Paul wants the Gentiles to remember that they are the ones being adopted in as God's people, and not the other way around.

And then Paul hits the final note of his argument, which is breathtaking in its implications:

¹⁹ *Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in”* [Romans 11:19].

He imagines a prideful Roman Gentile Christian saying, “Well, yes, I’ve been adopted in, but that’s only because the Jews were disobedient, hard-hearted, and unbelieving.”

Paul’s response:

²⁰ *That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear* [Romans 11:20].

He tells the Gentiles, “Don’t gloat over your salvation, but stand in awe and reverence before God, who has permitted you to be saved through faith.”

And then he hits the Gentiles with a bracing reminder:

²¹ *For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you* [Romans 11:21].

In other words, don’t you dare think that your current status as being part of God’s people mean that you can live as an unbeliever or allow your heart to become coarsened toward God, because if unbelieving Jews aren’t saved, neither are unbelieving Gentiles—stay faithful and persevere to the end!

He goes on:

²² *Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.* ²³ *And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.* ²⁴ *For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree* [Romans 11:22–24].

This is both a powerful warning and a word of encouragement to American Christians. There is lots of sloppy theological sentiment that is bandied about these days, and Paul’s words apply a necessary correction:

- The phrase “once saved, always saved” is helpful when it offers comfort to Christians who find themselves backslidden or having engaged in sinful practices and who sincerely mourn their sins and repent. Jesus never refuses anyone who cries out for mercy—you cannot **“lose” your salvation accidentally, the way you might accidentally drop your car keys.**
- On the other hand, the phrase “once saved, always saved” plainly is not what the New Testament teaches, if by that glib phrase we imply “Once you are baptized, it is impossible to reject God and walk away from His grace.” Look at the plain sense of what Paul says here:

²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off [Romans 11:22].

What Paul is saying to the Gentile Christians is, “Don’t think you can make the same mistake that the unbelieving Jews have made—they presume upon God’s kindness just because of their former status, even though they are presently rejecting His grace.”

This passage is a warning to us as well. We must continue to faithfully respond to God’s grace toward us or face the consequences.

But this passage is also an encouragement:

²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree [Romans 11:23–24].

There is hope for everyone—until the very end, God is graciously offering everyone the opportunity to repent and receive His mercy. So, even unbelieving Jews, if they were to turn back to God and accept Jesus as Messiah, would be brought back into God’s grace. After all, if God can graft in “wild” branches, who knows what he might do with the “natural branches”, i.e., with unbelieving Jews at some point in the future?

Pray today for spiritual awakening among the Jewish people.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19

ROMANS 11:25–36

PAUL'S THEOLOGY LEADS TO DOXOLOGY

²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;
²⁷ “and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”

²⁸ As regards the Gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

For the past three chapters, Paul has been making one long, technical argument, and in today's reading he finally brings it to fulfillment by recapping the main themes he has been emphasizing in chapters 9–11.

Remember: The Roman church to which Paul is writing was made up of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and most likely the

Gentile Christians were in the majority. Throughout this whole long, complicated section, filled with Old Testament allusions and quotations, Paul has been examining and answering four related questions:

1. Why did so many of the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah?
2. In light of Jewish rejection of Jesus and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, has God *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles as His chosen people?
3. Is there any hope that the Jews who previously rejected Jesus as Messiah might one day turn back and believe?
4. In light of all of the above, *what is God up to?*

²⁵ *Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in* [Romans 11:25].

Paul says that God has allowed Israel—His chosen people—to have hard hearts toward the Messiah so that the Gentiles have a chance to believe. “The fullness of the Gentiles” implies completion—whatever the actual number of Gentiles who become Christians, Paul says that God is going to keep going until every possible person is saved. As Paul has been arguing in previous verses, the closed doors of the Jews have caused the Gospel to be shared with the Gentiles, who seem to have opened their doors to Christ.

But then Paul makes this startling claim:

²⁶ *And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,*

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;*

²⁷ *“and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins”* [Romans 11:26–27].

How or when “all Israel” will be saved, he doesn’t say, but the clear implication that what was once only a minority of the Jews putting faith in Jesus will become, in God’s timing, the vast majority.

²⁸ *As regards the Gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.* ²⁹ *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.* ³⁰ *For just as you were at one*

time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience,³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all [Romans 11:28–32].

Paul uses strong language to make the point that God is now using the Jews to provoke the Gentiles to faith, and then God will use the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to faith, because He is committed to the Jews as His chosen people, and because God uses bad things for good. And all along God's goal has been to show mercy to as many people as possible!

³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

³⁴ *“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”*

³⁵ *“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” [Romans 11:33–35].*

The issues involved in chapters 9–11 are profound, and Paul (and us) is forced to acknowledge that God's ways are deep and mysterious.

But the depth of God's wisdom and mercy causes him to close this section of the letter with a doxology—a “word of glory.”

³⁶ *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen [Romans 11:36].*

What a good way to wrap up today's commentary!

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20 ROMANS 12:1–8

THEREFORE, DON'T CONFORM. BE TRANSFORMED.

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with

sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

“Therefore” means that Paul is following up from his beautiful doxology in the last chapter. In light of the long, complicated discussion of God’s relationship with Jews and Gentiles and His saving purposes, Paul says the only proper response is worship. “In light of what I just said, therefore....”

Because God is so good, worship is the proper response.

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [Romans 12:1].

Romans 12:2 is the theme verse for our entire Romans study:

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

What’s fascinating to me about this verse is that Paul says we can know God’s will after we are committed to transformation. Our worship will result in renewed minds so that we will be able to discern God’s will for our lives.

This passage comes after Paul’s long discussion about Israel and his remarks to Jewish and Gentile Christians in the previous 11 chapters. Now, he says, “You are all important, and no one is more important or necessary than anyone else.”

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness [Romans 12:3-8].

We each have a role to play, and each role is important in its own way.

1. You are not more important than anyone else.
2. But much depends on your role, and only you can play the part assigned to you, so play your part with zeal and cheerfulness.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21

ROMANS 12:9-21

PRACTICAL ADVICE ANYONE CAN FOLLOW

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Paul has been talking throughout the letter to both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians; in today's reading, he gives practical advice on how to live well with other people, even if they are different from you.

The advice here is pastoral and practical.

Pick a line and try it today.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22

ROMANS 13

IS CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE WRONG?

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹²The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

In Romans 13, Paul famously tells the Roman Church to “submit to the governing authorities.”

Why does he say that? What does that mean? Does that mean civil disobedience isn’t compatible with the Gospel? What about when the government is wicked?

As background to why Paul felt he needed to talk to the Romans about submitting to the governing authorities, this paragraph from Douglas Moo was helpful to me:

His purpose may be to stifle the kind of extremism that would pervert his emphasis on the coming of a new era and on the “new creation” into a rejection of every human and societal convention—including the government. Paul has had to respond to such extremism before.... (see 1 Corinthians). One can well imagine Christians arguing: “The old age has passed away; we are a ‘new creation in Christ’ and belong to the transcendent, spiritual realm. Surely we, who are now reigning with Christ in his kingdom, need pay no attention to the secular authorities of this defunct age”.... As a manifestation of his common grace, God has established in this world certain institutions, such as marriage and government, that have a positive role to play even after the inauguration of the new age.

— from *The Letter to the Romans*, by Douglas Moo

In other words, some Christians were taking Paul’s teachings too far and rejecting every form of civilization and convention. Paul needed to nip that in the bud. But, does that mean Christians must submit to a wicked law? Does Paul really mean that? No, and it has to do with what Paul actually writes.

As Moo goes on to helpfully put it:

Paul calls on believers to “submit” to governing authorities rather than to “obey” them; and Paul’s choice of words may be important to our interpretation and application of Paul’s exhortation. To submit is to recognize one’s subordinate place in a hierarchy, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have authority over us.... It is this general posture toward government that Paul demands here of Christians. And such a posture will usually demand that we obey what the governing authorities tell us to do. But perhaps our submission to government is compatible with disobedience to government in certain exceptional circumstances. For heading the hierarchy of relations in which Christians find themselves is God; and all

subordinate “submissions” must always be measured in relationship to our all-embracing submission to him.

— from *The Letter to the Romans*, by Douglas Moo

So, we need to obey the law, unless the law itself breaks God’s Law. Whenever possible, submit to the authorities over you, but never forget that God is the ultimate authority.

“Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

God’s intention for every law is that every law reflects God’s love.

⁸ *Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* ⁹ *For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* ¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law [Romans 13:8-10].*

I like Thomas Aquinas’s definition of love:

To love is to will the good of the other.

When we are willing another’s good, we are fulfilling God’s Law.

And then Paul comes back to the point he made at the beginning of chapter 12, namely that, in light of the Resurrection of Jesus and the Life of the Spirit, the new age has begun:

¹ *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* ² *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect [Romans 12:1–2].*

Do not conform to this world.

Here at the close of chapter 13, Paul goes further:

¹¹ *Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.* ¹²

The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ *Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.* ¹⁴ *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires* [Romans 13:11–14].

It's time to wake up and turn from the old ways of the world into the new ways of Christ. It's time to live in the Spirit and no longer live in the flesh.

The time is shorter now than when you woke up this morning.

Let's GO.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 25

ROMANS 14:1–12

THE "WEAK" AND THE "STRONG"

¹⁴ As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Who are the “weak” and who are the “strong?”

Remember that Paul is a pastor as well as a church planter, and he’s writing to real people in a real church in Rome. These people have divisions and difficulties, and Paul is writing to help them live fully into Christ.

At the time Paul is writing, the church in Rome is divided—there are Jewish Christians and there are Gentile Christians, and how they worship and live their lives is influenced by their relationship to the Mosaic Law (the Old Testament food laws).

The group Paul calls the “weak” are the Jewish Christians who still follow the Mosaic Laws and who are really troubled by the Gentile Christian practice of not following the Mosaic Laws. These Jewish Christians are passing judgment on the Gentile Christians who do not keep kosher. The reason Paul calls them the “weak” is because their conscience is seriously troubled by the thought of no longer needing to follow the Mosaic Law.

The Mosaic Law was necessary before Jesus as a sign of the Old Covenant—God asked His people to keep kosher as a way of showing their commitment to the covenant and membership in His people.

But, after the Resurrection, membership in God’s people is not defined by the Mosaic Law, but by faith. The problem is that for some of the Jewish Christians, this is really hard for them to mentally accept—it’s a huge change from how they were brought up.

¹As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand [Romans 14:1–4].

Paul wants the Gentile Christians to be understanding of the Jewish Christians who are scandalized by the fact that Christians no longer have to follow the Mosaic dietary and ceremonial laws. He reminds them that both the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians serve the same Lord, and so on these matters Paul reminds the Roman Christians that each person will have to stand in their conscience before Jesus, and that the Lord is with them.

⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written,

*“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”*

¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God [Romans 14:5–12].

In the same way that the Jewish Christians—due to their upbringings—observed certain Jewish dietary laws differently than did the Gentile Christians, so also they observed Jewish Old Testament holidays and sabbaths differently than did the Gentile Christians; Paul reminds them that it all belongs to God, and each Christian is going to have to stand before God.

How do you know the difference between small issues—over which Christians can come to different opinions in good faith—and big issues—about which Christians must be united? The short, self-serving answer: reading and studying Paul’s Letter to the Romans would be a good start! The more we allow Romans to transform our thoughts, the more we will better be able to see the difference between the big issues over which there can be no compromise, and the small issues where we can agree to disagree.

This is why I want Asbury to be a Bible-reading church—so we will be able to discern God’s will for us and know what the big issues are we must hold onto no matter the cost.

Let me close with what might seem like a silly example, but one I feel could be helpful to us at Asbury.

Every Sunday morning, we have two main services in our Sanctuary:

- A 9:00 AM “traditional” service
- An 11:00 AM “modern” service

(We also have two much smaller services in our chapel—Thursdays at 6 PM and Sundays at 8 AM. Together they account for only about 13% of our total average weekly attendance.)

I have found that people at Asbury make value judgments on those who attend either the traditional or modern services, and I don’t think this sort of attitude is helpful. In fact, I think it is harmful for the unity of the body at Asbury. I think we can all agree that musical preference is not a moral issue—you may believe that this form or that form of music is aesthetically and spiritually superior, but it’s not *immoral* for other people to prefer to worship in a different style.

You may very well be correct in your judgment that X style is superior to Y style. But when it comes to music—and much else in our church—let us beware that we let our preferences cause us to become puffed up with pride.

A small example, but an important one, I think.

P.S. I think 14:7-8 are just beautiful:

⁷For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's [Romans 14:7–8].

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 26

ROMANS 14:13–23

CHEESEBURGERS AT THE CHURCH PICNIC

¹³Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking

in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Paul's point in writing to this entire letter to the Romans is to introduce himself and his Gospel, and to address some of the divisions in the Roman church between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. His message in today's reading? *Don't do anything that makes it harder for fellow Christians to pursue Christ.*

I wonder what contemporary debates might fall into that category today?

There were Jewish Christians who felt that faithfulness required them to continue to obey the Jewish kosher laws. Paul—Jewish by background—has come to understand that in Jesus all the food laws that separated Israel from the nations have been fulfilled. After the Resurrection, what separates the people of God is not keeping the Jewish dietary or ceremonial laws, but faith in Jesus.

BUT

Paul also knows that there is nothing *wrong* with the Jewish Christian practice of continuing to keep kosher, and he doesn't want those Christians who do NOT keep kosher to scandalize the Jewish Christians by eating food in front of them that the Jewish Christians would consider unclean.

BRINGING CHEESEBURGERS TO THE CHURCH PICNIC

Imagine that I am Jewish by background, and you are Greek by background. We've both come to faith in Christ and are members in the Roman church. And let's say that I am just really struggling with the idea that the Jesus-people don't have to obey the food laws anymore—my background as a Jew taught me that how we eat is one of the defining marks of membership in God's people, and it's just TOO WEIRD AND OFF-PUTTING to think I don't have to anymore. More than that, I feel somehow *wrong* if I eat non-kosher.

If you show up at the church picnic with a basket of cheeseburgers and start chowing down right in front of me, it is really going to be hard for me to take. It will affect my walk with God.

So, Paul tells the Roman Christians who do NOT keep kosher that if they mess with someone's faith, they are doing wrong. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God is more important than what you eat or drink. Yes, of course you are not WRONG to eat a cheeseburger, but if you do it in front of me knowing that it is an issue for me, what you are doing is actually hindering God's work in me:

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God [Romans 14:20–22].

²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin [Romans 14:22–23].

What do these verses mean? I found this helpful:

In contrast to the Christian who acts from conviction is the weak Christian “who has doubts” or “who wavers.” The doubts of such Christians arise from the fact that they do not have a strong enough faith to believe that they can ignore the ritual elements of the OT law. Doubters such as this, Paul says, are “condemned” when they eat. This is not simply a subjective self-

condemnation; as the reference to it later in the verse makes clear, Paul refers to God's disapproval of such an act. Condemnation comes not because of the eating itself; as Paul has already explained (vv. 14, 20), eating anything one wants is quite all right for the believer. Rather, what brings God's condemnation is eating when one does not have the faith to believe that it is right to do it. This, Paul claims, is "sin." Why? Because, Paul goes on to explain, "everything that is not out of faith is sin." Paul here asserts a general theological principle. But it is necessary to describe accurately just what that principle is.... Paul claims that any act that does not arise from a conviction rooted in one's faith in Christ is sinful. For a Christian not a single decision and action can be good which he does not think he can justify on the ground of his Christian conviction and his liberty before God in Christ. Violation of the dictates of the conscience, even when the conscience does not conform perfectly with God's will, is sinful. And we must remember that Paul cites this theological point to buttress his exhortation of the strong. The strong, he is suggesting, should not force the weak to eat meat, or drink wine, or ignore the Sabbath, when the weak are not yet convinced that their faith in Christ allows them to do so. For to do so would be to force them into sin, to put a stumbling block in their way (see vv. 13, 20-21). First, their faith must be strengthened, their consciences enlightened; and then they can follow the strong in exercising Christian liberty together. —Douglas Moo

What can you do this Thanksgiving week to build up the faith of someone else?

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27

ROMANS 15:1-21

WHERE DO YOU NEED TO BE MORE BOLD TODAY?

15 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ²Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." ⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name.”

¹⁰ And again it is said,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

¹¹ And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him.”

¹² And again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

¹⁴ I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. ¹⁵ But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the Gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁷ In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. ¹⁸ For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the Gospel of Christ; ²⁰ and thus I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, ²¹ but as it is written,

“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”

Paul is addressing the split between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the Roman house church network. The “strong” are the Christians who no longer eat kosher or follow the Jewish ceremonial law and are not troubled by this break with the past. The “weak” are the Jewish Christians who continue to insist that Christians should follow Jewish ceremonial law, and who are grieved and troubled when they see Gentile Christians who aren’t following the Mosaic Law.

I love the thought of the Scriptures providing us with both endurance and encouragement. Paul wants the Roman Christians to stop looking down on each other, but to be unified. Paul’s point is that God has always planned to bring Jews and Gentiles together in the Messiah, “the Root of Jesse,” so the Romans need to start living as one family! Paul knows he’s been pretty bold in challenging the Roman Gentile Christians to do a better job of loving the Jewish Christians in Rome, but he reminds the Romans that he was given a special mission from God to preach to Gentiles, and he takes his calling seriously.

Where do you need to be bolder today?

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28 **ROMANS 15:22–33**

TODAY AT YOUR THANKSGIVING TABLE

²²This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, ²⁴I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. ²⁸When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. ²⁹I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

³⁰I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love

of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, ³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³² so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. ³³ May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Paul is writing *before* he heads to Jerusalem. We know from the Book of Acts that once Paul arrives in Jerusalem, a riotous mob tries to kill him and he is taken into Roman custody. Eventually, he will be sent to Rome to be judged before Caesar.

The reason he is going to Jerusalem is to take a contribution he has collected from the Gentile churches back to the struggling Jerusalem (Jewish) church.

Paul's reason for wanting to visit Rome is that he hopes the churches there will be his home base so he can take the Gospel to Spain, which would be the "end of the earth."

Generosity and unity are signs of the work of the Holy Spirit. At your Thanksgiving table how can you show generosity and pursue unity?

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 29

ROMANS 16

READING ROMANS BACKWARDS

16 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker

in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

¹⁷ I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. ¹⁸ For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. ¹⁹ For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. ²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

²¹ Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.

²² I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.

²³ Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.

²⁵ Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

We've made it! For the last three months we have been reading and studying and hearing and meditating on Paul's great letter.

Now that we are at the end, I can share with you that some people think that the key to understanding Romans is to read it backwards. This is

because the lists of names that Paul includes at the end of the letter are made up of three groups of names:

- Jewish names
- Greek names
- Latin names

So here you have this strange gathering of people from different backgrounds and ethnic groups who have been brought together by the faithfulness of Jesus and their faith in Him.

When you start at the end, you see that Paul really wants for the Romans is unity. Unity wasn't any easier 2,000 years ago than it is today.

Which doesn't make it any less important. Please be in constant prayer for unity in our church.

NOTES

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