



Text: Romans 11:1-32¹ (Reading: 11:1-5, 11-14, 17-18, 22-24, 25-29)
Series: Right Living – God’s Righteousness Transforming Our Lives
Title: Part 16 – God Completes What He Begins
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As I prepared this week to preach this portion of Paul’s letter, I was faced by a very real challenge. Paul’s focus in this chapter is on God’s dealing with the Jewish people, his own ethnic and religious community. Unless I miss my guess – and I don’t think I have – the vast majority of you here this morning are not Jewish. So here’s my challenge: what do you and I do with this portion of God’s holy, inspired, and unerring Word? What relevance do Paul’s Words have for you and me? How will God speak to us from what the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write in this portion of his letter regarding His dealing with the Jewish people?

Should I skip over this passage and move on to chapter 12 which is much easier to apply to our lives? I have to admit I was tempted! But I want you to notice what Paul wrote in verse 13...

“Now I am speaking to you Gentiles....” Romans 11:13

In other words, Paul is very consciously speaking to Gentiles about God’s dealing with the Jews.

There must be some reason why he thought Gentiles like you and I needed to think about the way in which God deals with the Jewish people. After wrestling with the passage this week I think I’ve discovered some great things we can learn about God from the way in which he deals with the Jewish people but before I discovered those things, I was impressed with another thought. It was a very simple thought and a very humbling one, here it is...

“It’s not about you.”

You might recognize those words as the first line of Rick Warren’s book, The Purpose Driven Life.² My struggle in dealing with the passage is that I was looking for a word I could immediately apply to my life and to your lives. I wanted a Scripture that was “about me,” not about somebody else. I wanted to be the centre of God’s attention. I wanted Him to speak to my situation and to my needs so that I could speak to your situation and to your needs. That’s why I was tempted to jump chapter 11 and move on Romans 12, leaving Israel behind.

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² Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Life, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002, p. 17



But I didn't, and now I'm glad I didn't and I hope you will be, too. After telling us that the central truth to finding purpose in life is that "it's not about you," Rick Warren writes...

The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose.³

With Warren's gentle rebuke in mind, I began to read Romans chapter 11 with a new purpose. I began with God. I believe that Paul wrote this letter under the direction of God's Holy Spirit and so there must be something of abiding spiritual value in it. More particularly, Paul intentionally wrote this chapter about God's dealing with Jews with a Gentile audience like you and I in mind. There's something here that the Holy Spirit wants us to see. What I'm going to share with you this morning won't exhaust the Spirit's intent, but I hope that what I say is on track with God's purpose for Paul's words. As I reflected on Paul's words I asked myself the question: *what can I learn about God from his dealing with the Jewish people?* My question was prompted by Paul's words in verse 22. He wrote...

"Note then the kindness and severity of God...." Romans 11:22

The word translated as "Note" has the root meaning of seeing or beholding something. Paul is inviting us to see the character of God revealed in the way in which he has dealt with His chosen people, the Jews. Because God's character doesn't change (Malachi 3:6), when we see of his character revealed in his relationships with one group of people, we can be sure that that same aspect of his character will be expressed towards us. It's a little like the advice we give prospective brides: if you want to know how your future husband will treat you thirty years from now, watch the way he treats his mother today. God has had a relationship with the Jewish nation for four thousand years! If we want to know how he will relate to us, we need to "note" the way he relates to Israel.

Paul directs our attention to **three major themes** in God's relationship with His people Israel. **First** of all, he asks...

"Has God rejected his people?" Romans 11:1

Paul's question opens up for us a window through which we get a glimpse of an aspect of God's character...

God's relentless grace!

³ The Purpose Driven Life, p. 17



Chapters 9, 10 & 11 contain an underlying question that relates to God's dealing with Israel: why have so few Jewish people believed in Jesus, the Messiah of God? Has God's plan to bring salvation to his people through faith in Jesus Christ failed? Has God closed the door on them and moved on to dealing exclusively with the Gentiles? Paul's answer is an emphatic: No!

"Look at me," he says! "I'm Jewish and God's at work in my life." Paul wrote...

**"I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew."
Romans 11:1-2**

Paul could point to an impeccable pedigree as a practicing Jew. He was...

**"circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."
Philippians 3:5-6**

Paul took his faith very seriously. He became a kind of "special prosecutor" whose job it was to find Jews who were straying from the faith and bring them back to Jerusalem for re-education, correction and what was worse, possible death if they refused to recant. His special target? Jews who believed in Jesus as Messiah. The very faith he now proclaimed is the faith he once aggressively attacked.

He was on his way to the city of Damascus to find these "heretics" when God intervened and changed his life forever. You can find Paul's story in Acts chapter 9, and again in chapter 22 and again in chapter 26 – Paul never tired of telling the story of God's amazing grace in his life. In those early days, Paul went by his other, more Jewish-sounding name, "Saul." The writer of The Book of Acts tells us that...

"Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." Acts 9:1-2

But on the road to Damascus, the risen Lord Jesus Christ met him and Saul was converted and became Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ, sent to share the message of salvation to the whole world but primarily to the Gentiles, like those who lived in the city of Rome (cf. Romans 11:13). On the day he was converted, God had said of Paul...



“he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” Acts 9:15

Notice that tag end phrase of God’s commission, “...and the children of Israel.” God had not rejected Israel even if many of them rejected His Son, Jesus Christ. That is God’s relentless grace in action.

Years after his conversion, Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy, and told his story with these words...

“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” 1 Timothy 1:12-15

Paul saw himself as a trophy of God’s relentless grace that “overflowed” for him. Even though he had been a violent, bitter antagonist of the Gospel, God’s amazing grace reached him, “the foremost” of sinners. And he told the Romans that his story was not an isolated incident even if it might not be the majority story of the Jewish people. There were other Jews, Paul wrote, who like him had come to believe in Jesus. There is, he said...

“a remnant, chosen by grace.” Romans 11:5

There is still today “a remnant, chosen by grace” – I know, because I used to work for a member of that remnant. His name is Steve Cohen and he was the founder of the work of Jews for Jesus here in Canada. The mission of Jews for Jesus is that same that God gave to Paul: to carry the name of Jesus before Gentiles, kings “and the children of Israel.” They encounter very stiff opposition to their work. Steve has had his tires slashed, received harassing phone calls at all hours and once a firebomb was thrown into his garage in Toronto. While I was working for Steve, a member of our office staff was exposed as a plant from an anti-missionary group who got himself employed by the mission so that he could steal the list of people who contacted Steve for information about Jesus.

I worked for a few months in the office of Jews for Jesus Canada back in the 1980s and I was deeply impressed by Steve’s courageous, dogged faith in the face of opposition. Steve said...

At first my family mistook my faith for a fad. But when they saw that I intended to live my life for Jesus, my parents disowned me. Since 1976, [Steve wrote this in 1985] they have refused all letters, visits and calls from us. They have never



acknowledged the birth of their three grandchildren.... Not only do we miss them, it grieves us to know that our children are missing that precious relationship. This has been the most personal challenge to my faith.

Yet, Steve continues, God has brought goodness to my family. My brother Dennis accepted Jesus as His Messiah and is growing in the Lord. (Steve Cohen, "My Messiah," Lutheran Witness, December 1985)

"A remnant, chosen by grace."

Would you like a God who pursues us even when we try to push him away? That's our God! His grace is relentless. Our God does not give up easily. Paul tried to push him away but God's grace pursued him. But why run? Why not yield and allow his grace to overflow into your life?

Paul then introduces a second phase of God's work with Israel. He asks...

"did they stumble in order that they might fall?" Romans 11:11

I think the NIV translation has caught the essence of his question with its translation:

"Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" Romans 11:11 (NIV)

In other words, is Israel's rejection of God's Messiah final? Again, Paul answers with a resounding, "NO!" and with a rationale for God's purpose behind their temporary rejection of Jesus.

"By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous." Romans 11:11

Paul's question opens up for us a window through which we get a glimpse of another aspect of God's character...

God's humbling kindness!

Because Israel rejected the message about Jesus, at least because the majority of Israel rejected him, God sent the Gospel to Gentiles, to you and me. We need to remember that when Jesus preached, he preached to Jews. There were only a few occasions when he interacted with Gentiles and one of those is very important for us to remember. A Canaanite woman, a Gentile woman who lived on the Mediterranean coast near the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon, came to Jesus and asked him to free her daughter from the oppression of an evil spirit. When she talked to him, Jesus didn't answer her. Because she kept pleading, the disciples came to him and interceded on her behalf and Jesus responded...



“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Matthew 15:24

The woman persisted and after an exchange of words, Jesus healed her daughter and commended the woman’s faith. Mark’s account of the same event records Jesus saying...

“Let the children be fed first....” Mark 7:27

Jesus’ ministry was focused on Israel because he was Israel’s Messiah. Until his ministry to Israel was finished, the “children” and “lost sheep” of Israel were his focus. Notice the word, “first.” I think Jesus was anticipating the day when it would come to “second” but he knew it wasn’t the time to move on just yet. It was only later, after Paul’s conversion on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9) and Peter’s encounter with the Holy Spirit on the rooftop in Joppa (Acts 10) that the Gospel went out to Gentiles with equal force. Paul’s conversion marks a milestone in missions – on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:15) God commissioned him as his...

“apostle to the Gentiles” Romans 11:13

Paul tells us that God’s rationale in extending the Gospel to Gentiles was strategic – his purpose was to “to make Israel jealous.” It’s still happening today. It was a Gentile friend who led Steve Cohen to faith in Christ. Alan had grown up with Steve, attended law school with him and served with him in the military. For years Alan had shared his faith in Jesus with Steve Cohen and engaged Steve in a study of the Bible. Steve had come to see that Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah but he hesitated from giving his life to Christ. It was Alan’s relationship with God that Steve longed for. He wrote...

I continued to watch Alan carefully and saw that he had something I completely lacked – peace with God. I wanted that, though I hesitated when I realized that Jesus provided his peace... [Alan] had a peace and true joy even in the military situations neither of us liked. Under law school pressures, he kept a long-range, positive outlook while my focus was shortsighted and narrow. He knew his sins were forgiven. I hid behind my sins – which bought no peace at all.

As you study Paul’s Gospel ministry in the Book of Acts you see an interesting pattern at work. Paul would come into a town where the Gospel had never been preached and he would begin his ministry there by preaching in the local synagogue, the Jewish house of worship. Some would accept the message, the remnant chosen by grace, but many would strongly oppose him. He would move out of the synagogue and continue his ministry in a secular location, preaching to Jews and Gentiles. Frequently, Gentiles would respond in great numbers and his Jewish antagonists would become inflamed by his success. They would



organize opposition to Paul and Paul would have to leave the city, leaving behind a core group of believers to carry on the Gospel ministry.

In the city of Antioch in the region of Pisidia, modern day central Turkey, Paul began his ministry as usual by preaching in the local synagogue. People were very interested in what Paul was saying and asked him to return the following Sabbath day to tell them some more of the Gospel. This is Luke's account of that Sabbath day...

“The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” [Isaiah 49:6]’ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” Acts 13:44-48

This past week I was trying to get tickets to a major sports event. The ticket office informed me that tickets would not go on general sale until after all the season ticket holders had had a chance to purchase them and until those who were on the waiting list for season tickets had had a chance at them. Only then, would I, “despised member of the rabble public” – they didn't say that, I just felt like that – only then would I get a chance at the tickets. But they said, considering the nature of this particular game, tickets for this kind of event are always gone before they make it to the general sale category – in other words, I didn't have a hope of getting tickets!

What Paul was telling these Gentiles in Antioch was that they were being offered “tickets”! And not just game-day tickets, but season tickets! Included! Gentiles are included in God's plan! That news from Paul, supported by God's prophetic word from the Old Testament, brought joy to the hearts of those spiritually hungry Gentiles. “God wants to save us! God wants a relationship with us! Amazing!”

To explain the inclusion of Gentiles into God's family, Paul used the picture of an olive tree. The root of the tree is spiritually sound (v.16). The olive root are the patriarchs to whom God made the promises recorded in the Old Testament. (cf Romans 11:28). The tree has some good branches, too. They are the Jewish believers in Jesus, the “true Israel” (Romans 9:6). But “some of the branches were broken off” (v.17) because they rejected Jesus. In their place, Paul tells the Gentile Romans...



“you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree....” Romans 11:17

I’m no gardener. But I have it on good authority that what Paul is describing here is something that is completely contrary to good horticultural practice. You don’t take wild cuttings and graft them on to a perfectly good, domesticated vine. In fact, you do the reverse. If you want to strengthen a plant, you take good branches and graft them on to a wild root. Those good branches will continue to produce good fruit, supported by the nutrients they draw from the wild root.

Paul wasn’t ignorant of good horticulture. His point is clear...

“Do not be arrogant toward the branches.” Romans 11:18

God did something that Paul describes in verse 24 as “contrary to nature” in order to show Gentiles his kindness. He wasn’t trying to make “better olives” – he was showing us kindness and mercy in opening his family to us. God isn’t “lucky to have us” – we’ve been shown mercy and grace by being included in God’s family tree. Paul warns the Gentile believers in Rome not to become arrogant or “proud” (v.20) toward the Jewish people, those who believe in Jesus as well as those who don’t, but rather to be grateful for God’s “humbling kindness” in including us in his family. These verses should put to death the blight of anti-Semitism that has afflicted our family tree over the centuries but sadly they haven’t. It is a cancer we need to attack whenever it rears its ugly head. It often begins with jokes and comments that need to be eradicated from our vocabulary. Sadly, I’ve heard Bible-believing Christians use the expression “to jew someone” when they mean being hard-fisted or dishonest in financial dealings. If you’ve done that, please eradicate that cancer from your speech.

In this picture of the olive tree, he wants us to behold...

“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

There’s no place for arrogance or pride in God’s family tree. We were “wild” things that God rescued. Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth...

“Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Corinthians 6:9-11



We're "wild" things who've been given a connection with a deep, rich strong spiritual root – the promises of God to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Like the promise he made to Abraham...

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” Genesis 17:7

Would you like to have a God who brings in people who don't fit and makes them members of his family? That's the humbling kindness of our God!

Finally, Paul looks to the end of God's story with his Jewish people. He's already hinted that there is still something wonderful in store for them. He's alluded to their "full inclusion" (v.12) and "acceptance" (v.15). He's reminded the Romans of God's ability to graft branches back in that have been broken off (v.23-24).

And now he boldly declares...

“Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved....” Romans 11:25-26

He begins this declaration by taking another poke at the balloon of spiritual pride. In other words, "just so that you understand that it isn't all about you," he says, God still has a plan for Israel. He refers to what he is about to tell them as a "mystery." It's a word that Paul uses to describe something in God's plan that has been hidden in the past but has now been revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 16:25). The Holy Spirit has opened Paul's eyes to God's plan for Israel. Some time in the future, after the full number of Gentiles have come to Christ, God is going to bring salvation to "all Israel."

Paul's revelation of this mystery opens up for us a window through which we get a glimpse of another aspect of God's character...

God's steadfast faithfulness!

What does Paul mean when he says that "all Israel" will be saved?

Is Paul referring to the "true Israel" he described back in Romans 9:6, the Israel that believes in Jesus? No. I don't think he's referring to them because they already are saved. Paul is referring to a future salvation experience for "all Israel."

Is he suggesting that every Jew who has ever lived will be saved? No. I don't think that's what he means. Paul's references to Israel in his Letter to the



Romans seem to refer to Israel at a particular point in time, not to all Jews everywhere at all times. (cf. Douglas Moo) Paul is talking about the Jewish people who will be alive at some point in the future.

So what point of time does he have in view? I think the answer is found in the Old Testament quotation he uses to support his declaration about Israel's salvation. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Paul writes...

“The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” Romans 11:26-27 [quoting Isaiah 59:20,21]

When is “the Deliverer” coming? When Jesus returns. And when Jesus returns God will bring salvation to the Jewish people living at that time. God made a promise to Israel through the prophet Isaiah and he will keep his promise to them because...

“the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” Romans 11:29

God made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and through his prophets to the children of Israel over the course of 2000 years and he will keep them. Nothing will deter him from the fulfilling of his own Word.

“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” Numbers 23:19

How will God bring salvation to them? Is it simply because they can trace their descent back to Abraham? No. Paul has made it clear that salvation isn't a matter of ethnic identity (9:6ff). Salvation comes in only one way to all and it's through faith in Jesus. There is no other way. Paul is adamant about that fact. There is nothing here to suggest that Israel will be saved any other way than through faith in their Messiah, Jesus Christ.

“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. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” Romans 10:12-13

Paul is saying that when Jesus returns there will be a sweeping spiritual revival among Jewish people and they will accept the Messiah that so many of them reject today. What God began 4000 years ago with Abraham, he will bring to completion and “all Israel will be saved.”

Would you like a God who can be trusted to keep his promises, even ones that are 4000 years old? That's our God! On the day that Jesus comes again, God's work with the children of Israel will be brought to fulfillment. And so will the work



he began in your life and mine. Our God finishes what he begins and his promise to you and me is that...

“he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Philippians 1:6

- God is relentless in His grace to overcome our resistance.
- His kindness is humbling to our pride.
- God is steadfast in His faithfulness to keep the promises he has made to us.

Take note, behold, this is our God!

- Invitation to prayer ministry
- Final Songs:
 - Great Is Thy Faithfulness
- Benediction