

ROMANS

Part 22: “Israel and the People of God”

Romans 11:1–36

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, August 7, 2022 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

Our Scripture reading today will come from Romans chapter 11. We will read verses 1 through 6 and verses 25 through 36.

“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. 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? ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.’ But what is God’s reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. ... 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. 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’; ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:1–6; 25–36).

Introduction

The summer of 2022 has been a historic summer in the Ritchie family because this is the summer that my six-year-old son Simon Peter [show [1Simon Peter in the Pool](#)] learned how to swim in the deep end of the swimming pool. And, yesterday, he even went down the slide for the first time!

Prior to this summer, Simon Peter staunchly refused to go to the deep end. The reason? The deep end of the pool is a scary place. It can be a dangerous place. If you don't know what you are doing, the deep-end is a place you can literally get in over your head. But, if you know how to swim, the deep end of the pool is also where you can find the most fun and excitement.

So today, we are all going to be Simon Peter Ritchie. We are going to spend some time in the deep end as it relates to the word of God. We will take a deep plunge into Romans 11, which is arguably one of the deepest sections in all of the New Testament.

Romans 11 is often a neglected part of the Bible because it is deep. For some, it may even be a little scary. After all, it addresses one of the most profound and complex questions the New Testament poses: *how are we to understand "Israel and the People of God"?*

So with that in mind, today we will explore the three big ideas from Romans 11: *1.) Israel and the Remnant, 2.) Israel and the Church, and 3.) Israel and the Plan of God.*

Exposition

1.) Israel and the Remnant

I would argue that it is nearly impossible to understand the story of the Bible and the brilliance of the gospel without understanding the role that Israel plays in Scripture.

In the Old Testament, Israel is chosen among all nations of the world to be the people of God. Through the prophets of Israel, God reveals his words and his ways. Through the history of Israel—from the Exodus to the Promise Land; from the exile to the return—God reveals his mercy and justice. Through the worship of Israel—the sacrifices, the priesthood, the temple—we are given previewed glimpses of the redeeming work Jesus Christ would later accomplish for our sake.

But as Paul is writing his letter to the Roman church, many of his fellow Israelites have rejected Jesus as the Messiah. At the same time, many people from non-Jewish gentile nations are coming to faith in Jesus Christ in droves.

This provokes an important yet haunting question. And is the very question that Paul asks as he begins Romans 11: *"I ask, then, has God rejected his people?" (Rom 11:1a).* His answer is *"By no means!"*

After all, Paul is an Israelite (Rom 11:1b). He is a descendant of Abraham. He belongs to the tribe of Benjamin. Paul certainly belongs to the people of God. But—and here is the crucial point—the reason Paul belongs to the people of God has nothing to do with his bloodlines or ethnic ancestry. Paul belongs to the people of God because he has *faith* in Christ.

Earlier in this letter, Paul has already introduced a radical new way of imagining the people of God. He said in Romans 9, *"... For not all who are descended from Israel*

belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (Rom 9:6–7).

In other words, just because a person was an Israelite in terms of nationality does not mean that the person belongs to the community of God’s people. Even from Old Testament times, the defining feature of God’s people was not Abraham’s flesh but Abraham’s *faith*.

Sadly, many Jewish people of Paul’s lifetime knew much about God but did not know God. They proudly claimed to be the people of God, yet, through their own hypocrisy and spiritual blindness, they strayed from God. They were more interested in justifying themselves before God through their works rather than faith in Jesus the Messiah. They were far more concerned with re-establishing the kingdom of Israel rather than hearing the good news of the kingdom of God in Christ.

Nevertheless, from the people of Israel, God saved a remnant who became the very apostles who declared the gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations. And that is a truth that Paul wants to convey in this passage: no matter how far gone and hopeless things seem with the people of God, God will always preserve and keep for himself a remnant.

Paul writes, *“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? ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.’ But what is God’s reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal’” (Rom 11:2–4).*

Paul interprets his own situation in light of the Old Testament scriptures. He recounts the story of Elijah [show [2Elijah the Prophet](#)], who was a faithful prophet of God in an age of compromise. Elijah had witnessed the power of God in undeniable ways. However, when he looked at his community of fellow Israelites, he saw idolatry, wickedness, and unfaithfulness to the Lord. Many Israelites were even worshipping a false god named Baal. Elijah felt lonely, and in his loneliness, he felt depressed. But God tells him that he has preserved for himself a remnant of those who have not bowed the knee to Baal (see: 1 Kgs 18:1–18).

In the same way, I think is easy at times to be devastated with sorrow over the many ways the people of God can fail to be faithful to God today. Just like the Jewish people of the ancient world, there are many people who claim to be Christians, but they live, think, and speak in a way that is more like the people of the world than the people of God. This is not a new phenomenon. But even in the darkest of times, the word of God tells us that God will always keep for himself a “remnant” (λείμμα): *“So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (Rom 11:5).*

For example, one of the more dark but recent chapters of church history occurred in twentieth-century Germany. Due to resentment toward other nations following World War 1, economic downturn, and fear of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, many of the leading German theologians and leaders of the German church chose to support a leader

who promised to restore the former greatness of the German nation and desired to work with the German church. That leader's name was Adolf Hitler.

But even in that dark moment, there began a movement of German Christians who opposed Nazism and how Hitler wanted to exploit the church for political gain. They founded a movement known as the Confessing Church, which boldly rejected any authority over the church except that of the Word of God. The Confessing Christians refused to be used by Hitler. Instead, they resisted him at significant risk to their own lives. In fact, the famous theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer [show **3Bonhoeffer**] belonged to this movement and was later martyred for his opposition to Hitler.

So wherever there is a simplicity of faith in the gospel, wherever there is loyalty to Jesus above all other loyalties, wherever there is desperate hope in the grace of God—there the Lord has kept a remnant for himself.

But we, too, must be discerning of our own hearts. We must not be judgmental toward the Jewish people of old. We must not be pharisaical, even to the Pharisees. We must learn to be suspicious of any way that we are clinging to our own works or are attempting to justify ourselves before God. As Paul says, *“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace”* (Rom 11:6).

Thus, we must always be humble. We must always be open to God. We must always be utterly dependent on God's grace.

2.) Israel and the Church

God has saved a remnant of Israel. But what about the rest of Israel? What about those who are still trying to justify themselves through works of the law? Paul has some hard truths to tell. Look at the next few verses of chapter 11: *“What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, 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.’ And David says, ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever”* (Rom 11:7–10).

If this is where our passage ended, it would seem like Israel has stumbled and fallen from the grace of God. They would seem to be without hope. But this is not the case.

Paul continues: *“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. 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! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”* (Rom 11:11–15).

Somehow, through Israel's rejection of the gospel, salvation has now come to those who are outside of the nation of Israel. The good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God has spread like wildfire. Even as Paul writes this very letter, less than three decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, there are now churches in modern-day Turkey, Greece, and northern Africa. There is now even a church in the imperial capital city of Rome.

This is extraordinary, but it provokes an immediate question that has garnered a lot of debate among scholars. The question: *what is the church's relationship with Israel?*

Now, I believe that the book of Romans helps us avoid two ditches along the road, and we don't want to fall into either of them. The first ditch is something that some have called "Replacement Theology." Replacement theology is the belief that the church has simply replaced Israel. Israel is the scaffolding; the church is the cathedral. Now, that the cathedral is here, we can just throw away the scaffolding. This view might lead us to neglect the Old Testament altogether because we consider it irrelevant, and there are some Christians who do just that. This view might even justify a sense of anti-Jewish hatred, which, tragically, has at times been present in church history. Replacement theology effectively untethers the gospel from how God has revealed himself through the story of Israel.

But I would argue the other extreme is just as dangerous. I term the other extreme "Redundancy Theology." In this view, there are essentially two ways to be a part of the people of God. Option 1: Be an ethnic Jew who faithfully observes the commands of the Torah. Option 2: Trust in Jesus for your salvation. In this view, the Jewish people and the nation-state of Israel are the true people of God. Christians are a different (and redundant) type of the people of God. So, Jewish people are welcome to believe in Jesus, but the salvation he offers is only a redundancy to what is theirs by virtue of ethnicity. This, too, distorts the gospel.

For example, I once listened a pastor give a sermon on the pitfalls of replacement theology. The sermon was well-intentioned, but he overstated his case in a way that caused other theological problems. He said, and I quote, "*If God abandoned his first bride [meaning Israel], then how can we be sure he won't abandon his second bride [meaning the church].*" After the talk, someone asked me what I thought about what was said, to which I responded, "*God doesn't have two brides.*"

Make no mistake: there is only one Bride of Christ, there is only one people of God, and there is only one way, truth, and life through which we will be saved—and that is Christ alone (cf. John 14:6).

The church of Jesus Christ is neither a replacement nor a redundancy for Israel. The church of Jesus Christ is the covenant community of the people of God—both Jew and gentile—who have been united by faith in Jesus Christ. If you are a gentile and have trusted in Jesus for your salvation, you have been grafted into the family of Abraham.

Paul illustrates this concept by using an illustration from the world of ancient Mediterranean horticulture. This is an extended illustration, and we are most certainly

now in the deep end of the pool, but don't worry. We will unpack it together. Beginning in verse 16, Paul writes: *"If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. 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, 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. Then you will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. 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. 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. 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"* (Rom 11:16–24).

In this analogy, Israel is a domesticated olive tree (καλλιέλαιον). Gentile nations are wild, undomesticated olive trees (ἀγριέλαιος). Domesticated olive trees are what farmers would grow. They have been genetically formed for generations to bear bigger fruit, better fruit, and more fruit than their wild cousins.

Interestingly, olive trees were first domesticated in the region of the ancient Levant—where Israel is. But by the time Paul was alive, domesticated olive trees had been planted all across the Mediterranean basin, in places like Greece, Italy, and Spain [show [4Mediterranean Basin](#)]. This, of course, makes the olive tree the perfect metaphor for the church, as faith in the gospel also spread out from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8).

But each olive tree variety is a little different. Why? Because farmers would plant a domestic olive tree from one region and then graft in a piece of a wild olive tree that was better acclimated to that very region.

A great example of this practice is seen in “The Olive Tree of Vouves” [show [5The Olive Tree of Vouves](#)], located on the island of Crete. It is now a monument and the oldest olive tree in the world. It is at least two-thousand years old, but it is possible that it could be closer to four thousand years old. But even at its youngest, this tree was alive as the Apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans, and it still produces fruit today!

Scientists have studied this tree and found that it has two DNA strands. The first comes from an olive tree stand domesticated in mainland Greece. The second is from a wild olive tree native to the island of Crete that was later grafted into the domesticated plant.

In this way, the Olive Tree of Vouves is a vivid illustration of the church of Jesus Christ. Israel represents the domesticated tree, the family of Abraham, and God's covenant people. But where some of the original branches were pruned, the branches from wild olive trees, representing gentiles, were grafted in. Now, people who were once alienated

from the people of God have been brought near by the blood of Christ (cf. Eph 2:12–13). Now, people from all nations can come into the covenant community of God’s people that span both space and time.

If you are a Christian, if you believe in Jesus, you are a part of the same church and spiritual community as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; as Peter, James, and John; as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin; as Reverend Spurgeon, Professor Lewis, and Dr. King.

I know these are big ideas. So to make a very complicated matter as clear as I can. I want to share three short sentences that are loaded with deep and abiding theological significance. Here we go, 1.) Father Abraham had many sons. 2.) Many sons had father Abraham. 3.) I am one of them, and so are you.

3.) Israel and the Plan of God

Millenia and centuries ago, God promised Abraham that his family would be blessed and that through his family, the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen 12:2–3). God has been faithful in keeping that promise.

Abraham’s family became a nation. That nation became the kingdom of Israel. And though Israel endured judgment and exile, due to their sin and faithlessness, through this one nation came the Savior of all nations. And though many in Israel rejected their Messiah, countless people from all nations have now come into the community of God’s people.

But the last thing in the world gentiles should do is grow arrogant, judgmental, or wise in our own eyes against those of Israel who do not yet know Jesus. We must instead note both “the kindness and severity of God” (Rom 11:22). God is good. He is just. He is kinder and more merciful than we could ever comprehend. A broken and contrite heart he will not despise (cf. Ps 51:17). But he fiercely opposes the proud.

So, for the people of Israel who do not believe in Jesus, our hearts should burn with the same evangelistic desire as the Apostle Paul. We should plead that, in his mercy, God would send a revival among Jewish people both in the nation of Israel and abroad. Let us hope that those who belong to the family of Abraham by blood would be grafted into the family of Abraham by faith.

As Paul warns, “*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. 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’; ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown*

to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (Rom 11:25–32).

So may we humble ourselves before the truth of our need for Jesus, who came into humanity through Israel, so that we might receive the mercy that is found only in him (cf. Rom 11:32). And may we marvel and the unfathomable wisdom of God that has wrought a plan of redemption we could never have anticipated through the wisdom of man.

Conclusion

Israel matters because Jesus matters.

Through Israel, God folded himself into humanity and lived among us. However, Jesus did not only come to us through Israel. He is the *embodiment* of the true and better Israel. He is the true seed of Abraham through which the nations will be blessed. He is the true Isaac who was offered as a sacrifice on the mountain. He is the true Jacob who was sent to claim a bride for himself.

As Moses spoke the word of God, Jesus is the word of God. As David the shepherd was chosen to be king, Jesus is the good shepherd who is the King of all kings.

Like Israel passed through the Red Sea, Jesus passed through the waters of baptism. Like Israel walked through the desert for forty years, Jesus was tempted in the desert for forty days yet without sinning.

As Israel was composed of twelve tribes, Jesus called to himself twelve apostles who would make disciples of all nations. As Israel endured judgment for their sins in exile, Jesus endured judgment for *our* sins on the cross.

Jesus is the completion of the story of Israel. He is the fulfillment of all Israel’s promises. His resurrection, ascension, and the truth of his return are the pinnacle of all Israel’s hopes.

This is the deep end of the pool. The plan of God and the miracle of salvation point to a mystery that we cannot possibly comprehend. But we can stand in awe of his glory.

So, as we conclude this chapter, let's join in with and feel the weight of the Apostle's own words: *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:33–36).*

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) Read Romans 11:1–6. Define the term "remnant." Why is this an important term to understand concerning the history of Israel and the church today?
- 2.) Read Romans 11:7–24. Discuss the images of cultivated/domesticated olive and wild olive trees. What do they represent, and how should they help us better understand the nature of the church?
- 3.) Read Romans 11:25–29. How do these verses teach Christians to view Jewish people who do not yet believe in Jesus? How might we pray for unbelieving Jewish people?
- 4.) Romans 9 through 11 is a very deep and dense section of Scripture that is full of mystery. In light of this section's depth, why are the verses of Romans 11:33–36 such an appropriate way to conclude this section? How do these final verses of Romans 11 move you to worship?