

Romans 11:1-14, 25-28 God's faithfulness to Israel, and to us!

We can place our faith and trust in the Lord because he is 100% trustworthy (Proverbs 3:5-6). Indeed, we are saved by this kind of trusting faith ... though it is more through His faithfulness we are saved, than through our faith.

To recap on Romans so far,

Chapter 1-4 justification from sin – without which obedience of faith isn't possible
Chapter 5-8 the obedience of faith – the new way of the Spirit
Chapter 9-11 the obedience of faith – for Gentiles in relation to stumbling Israel
Chapter 12-16 the obedience of faith – the practical outworking of all that's been taught

In chapter 11 we are concluding the third section. We understand from this chapter God's continuing faithfulness to His people Israel, and this should encourage us to understand His faithfulness for us better.

The existence of the modern State of Israel makes this subject all the more interesting. However I want to make here just one simple observation from Romans 11, and that is that God remains faithful to the Jewish people, even in their unbelief.

In 1st century Rome this wasn't simply a theoretical question. Jews and Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus were in close proximity to the Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah (which was most of them.) Believers continued either to meet in the synagogues, or had their own meeting places, but under the synagogue umbrella. Paul recognised this to be an area which needed much grace. So in a sense we may think the issue is less relevant for us. However to understand our Bible, and God's purposes in the world today, and world events such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a Biblical perspective, it is important.

BMSWorld Mission produces a quarterly magazine called 'Mission Catalyst'. In 2013 it produced one on the subject of Israel and Palestine. Although different views were represented, there was much I could not agree with. However, I agreed with the premise that "ignorance is no longer an option." David Kerrigan (former Director of BMSWorld Mission) asked the question, "How are we to understand modern day Israel in the light of Scripture, not least passages such as Romans 9-11."

This starts by asking the question, "Has God rejected his people because they rejected Jesus as Messiah." Paul answers this question with an emphatic "No!" (Romans 11:1,2,11,29). Even at this very early stage of Christian faith it seems there were Gentiles who thought that God had indeed replaced Israel with the church (called replacement theology or supersessionism.) Unfortunately this view became the dominant theology, and it was well represented in the BMS Catalyst magazine!

Notice in Romans 11:1 Paul calls the Jews *His people*. Although they had not accepted Messiah they are still *His people*. Yet as we have been going through Romans we have seen again and again that salvation does not depend on Jewish ethnicity (e.g. Romans 3:23-24, Paul's whole argument in Romans 4, Romans 10:12). From verses like these it's easy to conclude that the Jews are no longer God's people, but it is those who believe in Jesus, i.e. the Christians.

Galatians 3:28 *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*

We are all one in Christ Jesus. But does this mean that the categories of male-female, slave-free and Jew-Gentile no longer exist? Paul is not saying this. He sums it up in Romans 11:28, *As regards the gospel they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their fathers.*

God promised to be faithful to His people the Jews and to remember His covenant even in their exile and unbelief (e.g. Leviticus 26:44-45). God's faithfulness doesn't mean that any of us can presume on God in any way. But the idea that God could break His eternal covenant with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was for Paul unthinkable. As he says in Romans 11:11, they may have stumbled, but not beyond recovery.

The reality is that the Jews are an unusual phenomenon. How many Edomite, Moabite or Hittite friends do you have? None, because those peoples long since passed away. But do you have any Israelite friends? Quite possibly! Mark Twain said, *"The Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Persian, rose, filled the planet with sound and splendour, then faded to dreamstuff and passed away. The Greek and the Roman followed, made a vast noise and they are gone. Other peoples have sprung up, held their torch high for a time, but it burned out and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal, but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"*

When we consider that the Jews are so few in number; their unparalleled persecutions; their dispersion to all corners of the globe; their continuing existence is nothing short of a miracle. The 18th century atheistic Prussian King Frederick the great once asked his physician Zimmermann of Brugg-in-Aargau, 'Zimmermann, can you name me a single proof of the existence of God?' Zimmermann answered, 'Your majesty, the Jews.'

How has it been possible for these people to survive? Jeremiah had something to say as well on this matter, *'This is what the Lord says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the Lord, "will Israel ever cease being a nation before me."* Folks, they are still His people! (1Samuel 12:22, Psalm 94:14).

The Lord did not change His mind with the coming of Jesus. In choosing the Jews God has purposed, one way or another, to manifest His redemption to the whole world through them. In Romans 11:11, *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. 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!* I think Paul is meaning here that if God's people the Jews had accepted Christ this would have inevitable ushered in the kingdom of God. Rather, their unbelief has given opportunity for the gospel to go out to all nations, (fulfilling God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3). So, if their trespass has brought riches (the riches of Christ) to the world, which it has, *how much more* will their full inclusion mean, because their inclusion will mean the coming of the Messianic era, a period of untold blessing and unprecedented peace for the world, *when the nations will beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks* (Isaiah 2:4). So the future of the world is rosy, although it still has much hardship to go through.

In Romans 11 Paul is cautioning the Gentile believers, *Now I am speaking to you Gentiles* (Romans 11:13). He is cautioning them against arrogance, *Lest you be wise in your own conceits, 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, 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."*

Jesus also spoke of the *times of the Gentiles being fulfilled* (Luke 21:24). This doesn't mean that every Gentile will be saved. It does mean, I believe, that there will be representatives from every tribe and language and nation ransomed by the blood of Christ for God and singing the new song of the Messiah on that Day (Revelation 5:9)! This has been and still is a great motivation for world mission.

Likewise, when Paul says *all Israel will be saved*, he doesn't mean that every Jewish person will be saved; he means that Israel as a nation will be saved. This doesn't mean, in my view either, that the Jews will become Christian as we understand the term Christian. It does mean however that they will come to God by the only way possible, and that is through their Messiah who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

All this reminds us that God is utterly faithful to all of His promises. Therefore, *trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*