

GOD WORKS THROUGH HIS MERCY

Romans 11:1-36

Key Verse: 11:32

“For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

Paul started chapter 9 by expressing his great sorrow and unceasing anguish over the unbelief of the people of Israel. Because of their unbelief, God’s salvation plan seemed to have failed. But God never fails. God chooses whom he wants out of his mercy and continues his work. In chapter 10 we learned how God’s sovereign choice and mercy were exercised through the Messiah. The Messiah became like a double-edged sword. Those who believe in him are saved, while those who reject him stumble and fall. This applies to both Jew and Gentile. Many Gentiles who heard the gospel believed in Jesus as their Lord and were saved. On the other hand, most Jews deliberately rejected the gospel. They seemed to have no hope. Now, in chapter 11, Paul deals with their unbelief. Through his sincere struggle, Paul realized that God works through his mercy. This gave him hope for his people to be saved. Then his anguish turned into a song of praise to God. When we see those who are disobedient and rebellious, it is hard to have hope for them. We easily despair, become critical and judge them. But when we turn our eyes to God and see how merciful he is, we find hope. We can be merciful as our Father is merciful. The key word of this chapter is “mercy.” When we have God’s mercy in our hearts we can see anyone with hope. Let’s learn how God works through his mercy.

First, God works through his remnant (1-10). In verse 1, Paul started with a question, **“Did God reject his people?”** Usually, when someone is rejected, they, in turn, reject their antagonist. When Israel rejected God, it may have seemed natural for God to reject Israel, too. Did he? Paul answered, **“By no means!”** Then he presented evidence, beginning with himself. He was a physical descendant of Abraham who could trace his genealogy through the tribe of Benjamin. Though that tribe was small, they had great pride. It was because they kept their identity as God’s people when the ten tribes rebelled against Judah and indulged in idol worship. Paul was indeed a true Israelite. But before knowing Jesus, he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man (1Ti 1:13). Yet God had mercy on him. He confessed, **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But...I was shown mercy so that in me...Christ Jesus might display his immense patience...”** (1Ti 1:15-16). Based on personal experience, Paul was sure that God did not reject his

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people. Likewise, when we remember Jesus' grace personally, we can be sure that God has not given up on our people. Though the spiritual climate seems dark, we should not be discouraged, doubting God's love. Rather, we should have confidence that God still loves his people. In verse 2a, the phrase, **"whom he foreknew"** gives us a more solid basis for our confidence. It is not in us, or the people around us, or our environment; it is in God himself. God knows in advance and chooses by his unfathomable wisdom which never fails. God himself is the guarantee of his salvation work.

Paul presented further evidence through Israel's history. He said, **"Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah - how he appealed to God against Israel"** (2b). In the time of Elijah, Queen Jezebel provoked King Ahab to lead the entire nation into Baal worship. She killed the Lord's prophets - who had preached the words of God - and demolished the Lord's altars. Due to one ungodly woman's bad influence, the whole nation was led astray. In that environment, those who served Baal could get a job easily. But those who served the Lord were taken advantage of and persecuted. The land was full of the sexual immorality and violence that Idol worship always produces. There seemed to be no hope. Yet God raised one man Elijah and trained him as his prophet. Elijah challenged the nation with zeal for God and in the power of the Spirit. He said, **"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him"** (1Ki 18:21). Elijah challenged the Baal prophets to demonstrate who was the true God. God answered Elijah's prayer dramatically and revealed himself as the true God. Then Elijah put to death the Baal prophets. After this event, Elijah was exhausted. Then Jezebel threatened to kill him, and he became fearful and fled to Mount Horeb. There, in despair, he appealed to God against Israel: **"Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"** (3). Elijah thought that he would soon be killed, and that would be the end of God's work. Was that true?

Let's see how God answered: **"I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal"** (4). For his own glory, and by his own initiative and effort, God had reserved a remnant of seven thousand who did not worship idols. Rather, they worshiped the one true God. Though it was not seen by people, in those dark times, God was working through his remnant according to his sovereign will. Through this historical event, Paul found a principle: God never fails, regardless of the situation. He said, **"So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace"** (5). In Elijah's time,

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in Paul's time, and in our time, there is a remnant chosen by grace. God has preserved his remnant on our campuses, in our communities, throughout our nation and the world. The Lord wants us to join in the work of finding them and sharing his word with them. They are ready to hear the word of God, believe in Jesus and be saved. It is God's amazing grace to be included in his remnant. So we may be tempted to become proud. But let's remember that the remnant is chosen and preserved only by God's grace, not by works (6a). If it were by works, grace would no longer be grace (6b). God's work is carried out by his sovereign mercy through undeserving people, including us. We should be thankful always.

In verses 7-10, Paul turns his attention to the unbelieving Jews. He asks, **“What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain”** (7a). They did not obtain God's righteousness because they rejected Jesus. God's remnant, those who believed Jesus, obtained God's righteousness. But this remnant was small in number. The majority of Israel was hardened (7b). Even the fact that their hearts were hardened was under God's sovereign will. Verse 8 says, **“As it is written: ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day.’”** This is a quote from Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10. It was prophesied that God would harden the hearts of unbelievers. Those whose hearts are hardened may think that they are okay. But they are not. Hardening has serious consequences. It produces spiritual drowsiness that prevents people from seeing or hearing spiritual reality. Though God reveals his majesty, glory, power and beauty, they cannot see it. Though God speaks wonderful words of life, they cannot hear them. They are spiritually blind and deaf. The more serious problem is that behind these symptoms there is Satan. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, **“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”** We should remember that there is always Satan's work behind the scenes. Spiritual drowsiness is so dangerous.

In verses 9-10, Paul tells of even more serious consequences of hardening. He quoted from Psalm 69: **“And David says: ‘May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.’”** Their table refers to their feast of spiritual nourishment through God's word. The law was given to them to lead them to the Messiah. When they rejected the Messiah, their source of nourishment became a source of trouble. It became a snare, a

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trap, a stumbling block and retribution for them, for it bound them under the curse of the law. They were heavily burdened by grief, fear and oppression. As foretold in Scripture, this was precisely the spiritual condition of Israel due to their unbelief. Only in Jesus can this destiny be changed. When we come to Jesus, our eyes are opened, and our ears unstopped. Sorrow, fear and anxiety vanish, and we are filled with peace, love and joy. Our souls find true rest and are nourished by the bread of life, and the living water.

Second, God has hope for Israel out of his mercy (11-36). As Paul considered the spiritual condition of unbelieving Israel, there seemed to be no hope. So he asked, “**Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?**” (11a) It meant was their hopeless situation permanent? He answered, “**Not at all!**” Then he explains why in verses 11b-12. Israel had only stumbled, not fallen permanently. And their stumbling served God’s purpose. Because of their transgression, salvation had come to the Gentiles. Paul had witnessed this again and again in his mission journeys. Whenever he entered a city, he began by preaching the gospel in the Jewish synagogue. Most of the Jews rejected his message. So, he turned to the Gentiles. When the Gentiles heard the gospel, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord. They believed and experienced the blessing of salvation (Ac 13:42-48). This made Israel envious, which could motivate them to repent and believe in Jesus. Based on this, Paul found hope for Israel and anticipated a much greater blessing upon the whole world when Israel accepted the gospel (12).

In verses 13-24, Paul teaches the Gentile believers God’s hope for Israel and gives them a warning. As the apostle for the Gentiles, Paul took pride in his ministry and worked hard to serve them. Jews misunderstood him, thinking that he betrayed his nation Israel. But actually, he hoped that through his ministry Israel would become envious and accept the gospel (13-14). In verses 15-16, Paul gives the reason why Israel’s acceptance is important. If their rejection brought reconciliation to the Gentiles, how much greater a blessing would their acceptance bring to the whole world (15)? In verse 16, Paul taught the same truth by using two metaphors: the dough and the root. The firstfruits probably refers to the Jewish patriarchs, such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to the saving promises given to them. Since they are consecrated to God by faith, so are their descendants - the whole lump of dough. Similarly, the root probably refers to the patriarchs and the branches to their descendants. Of course, as Paul has already explained, this is not a guarantee that every single Jew will be saved.

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But it indicates that God will be faithful to his promises and seems to imply that the nation as a whole will be saved.¹

Paul's warning comes in verses 17-24. He cautioned Gentile believers not to be arrogant or judgmental toward unbelieving Israel. Rather, they should become humble, have a sense of God's history, and participate in God's work for Israel's salvation. To help them understand, Paul uses the metaphor of an olive tree. In verse 17, some of the branches refers to the unbelieving Jews and wild olive shoots refer to the Gentiles. Wild olive shoots are unplanned, uncultivated, unprotected and do not receive proper nourishment. So they cannot bear fruit. However, when the Jews became unbelieving, like broken branches, the Gentiles were grafted in, took root and began to enjoy the nourishing sap from the cultivated olive tree (18). They grew and bore fruit. The Gentile believers received great blessing through the gospel. Most of the Roman believers were probably Gentiles. It was easy for them to feel superior to the minority Jewish believers. A superiority mentality wounds people and causes division. Eventually it can destroy the body of Christ. We should guard against a superiority mentality in the body of Christ, especially those of us who are in the cultural majority, or positions of leadership. It is only by faith that anyone receives God's blessings through the gospel (19-20a). So Paul warns: **"Do not be arrogant, but tremble"** (20b). God does not show favoritism. If Gentile believers did not keep their faith, they would not be spared (21). Paul wanted them to consider who God really is. He is not only kind, but also stern (22). They should not take God's grace for granted. Moreover, they should realize that God can easily graft the Israelites back into his olive tree when they believe in Jesus (23-24).

From verse 25, Paul begins to address the whole church in Rome, "brothers and sisters." He does not want them to be ignorant of God's mystery due to their self-centeredness (25a). Here the mystery is not a puzzle, but something revealed which was previously hidden. We tend to see everything from our own point of view, not from God's point of view. We need to discover God's mystery. What is that? Paul said: **"Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full numbers of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved"** (25b-26a). Israel's hardening is not permanent, but temporary. During the time of Israel's hardening, God opened widely the door of salvation to the Gentiles, so the full number can come in. After that, all Israel

¹ See ESV study Bible notes.

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will be saved. This does not mean that every single ethnic Jew will be saved. It points to a widespread acceptance of the gospel by the whole nation Israel. This will be fulfilled through Jesus, who takes away their sins (26b-27). We cannot fully understand God's mystery, but we trust God who carries out his salvation.

Now Paul expresses God's hope for Israel based on his calling in verses 28-29 and his mercy in verses 30-32. In regard to the gospel, unbelieving Israel had become God's enemy for the sake of the Gentiles. It is because God used Israel's hardening to bring salvation to the Gentiles. But in regard to election, that is God's calling and choosing, Israel is loved on account of the patriarchs (28). God chose the patriarchs by his grace and gave them his covenant and promises which extended to their descendants. Even though Israel became unbelieving, God did not cancel his covenant and promises. He still loves Israel out of his great faithfulness. That is why Paul says, **"...for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable"** (29). Here God's gifts are unique blessings given to Israel as Paul mentioned in 9:4-5. His calling is election of them as his people out of his sovereign choice.

In verses 30-31 we find the logical construct **"Just as...so."** The Gentiles were once disobedient and rebellious toward God. They indulged in every kind of depravity and lived as God's enemies. But now they had received God's mercy as a result of the Jews' disobedience. As God had mercy on them in their disobedience, so he would have mercy on Israel in her disobedience. Through this we can find a principle. Let's read verse 32. **"For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."** Here "all" means Jews and Gentiles alike. Just as all have sinned and fallen under the power of sin, so all are saved by believing in Jesus. There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. God extends his mercy to all kinds of disobedient people. God is full of mercy and carries out his salvation work based on his mercy. In light of God's great mercy, even the hardened Israelites have hope, and any wretched sinner has hope. David and Leah Ortiz are messianic Jews who have been missionaries to Israel for many years.² Because they have proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah, orthodox Jews have persecuted them through public demonstrations, refusing to do business with them and even harassing their children in school. One day a Jewish fanatic planted a bomb that decimated their 15-year-old son Ami and ruined their home. Through that event, the Lord worked. He brought about a miraculous healing of Ami. He also helped

² Fisher, Julia, *What is God Doing in Israel: When Jews and Palestinians meet Jesus* (Oxford, England: Monarch Books, 2016).

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the family to forgive the perpetrator. Later, the man was caught and imprisoned. They pray for his salvation every day and plan to share the gospel with him. It is because the Lord made it clear that he has hope for that man. This is God's great mercy. Many of us have worried about the spiritual condition of our children, Bible students, and nation. Sometimes, it is hard for us to have hope. But when we know God's great mercy, our hearts are flooded with hope. God is merciful toward disobedient and rebellious people. Thank God for his great mercy!

When Paul discovered how powerfully God has been working through his mercy, he burst forth into a song of praise to God. He exclaimed, **“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?’”** God has infinite wisdom and knowledge, which no one can measure. No one can judge him, or give him counseling, or claim that God owes them something. It is because **“from him and through him and for him are all things.”** God is the origin, maintainer, and destiny of all things. God is the Creator, Sovereign Ruler and Judge. He is worthy to receive praise and worship, honor, power and glory from all creation. To him be the glory forever! Amen.