

A Sermon by
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Chinese Christian Church
of New Jersey

Sunday, October 3, 2004

The Covenant-Keeping God

ROMANS 11:1-36

One thing the Book of ROMANS does is to give us a window through which we can gain insight into what was going on during the first decades of church history. When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to Rome, several things were happening. On the political scene there was an ever-increasing tension between the Romans who occupied Israel and the Jews who lived there. And, there were clear signs that Rome was getting fed up with the Jews living in Israel and that Israel's destruction was imminent. On the religious scene the Christian church continued to grow at a fast rate, and most of the growth was conversion growth from the Gentile nations.

Both the political and religious changes taking place in Israel would cause the average Jew to wonder about the covenant promise God had made with Israel. Hadn't God chosen Israel to have special privilege over all the other nations in the world? What is the meaning of this imminent destruction that Israel now faces? And, what is the meaning of all these Gentile people who are not direct descendants of Abraham claiming that the blessings God promised to Abraham are also theirs? Don't those blessings exclusively belong to Israel as a race?

As far as the promise God made with Abraham is concerned, there really are only two possible ways to answer these questions and explain all the changes that were taking place during the time the apostle Paul wrote his letter to Rome. One is that Israel is reaping the harvest of her own disobedience. In other words, Israel has broken covenant with God, and that is why she is being rejected. The other explanation is that God has broken covenant with Israel.

In ROMANS 11, the apostle Paul used all the literary skills that God had given him to attack the notion that God has been unfaithful to the covenant promise He made with Abraham and to reinforce the truth that all the negative things happening are a direct result of Israel's disobedience to truth. Israel had failed to believe the truth revealed to her, and by doing so she broke covenant with God.

When it comes to believing in truth, there are two major challenges that we face as human beings. One is ignorance created by false teaching or by traditions that have no relationship with the truth. We get it into our brains that something which is false is true. And then, when the real truth comes along, we cannot see it for what it is. Jesus knew that many of the Jewish leaders were blinded to the truth by their own false teachings and traditions. In [JOHN 9:41](#), Jesus is recorded as saying, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." If only they had admitted to their ignorance, those leaders could have been saved. But because they clung on to their ignorance, their guilt would remain. Ignorance is one major obstacle that stands between us and belief in truth.

The other major obstacle is our hardness of heart created by our past rejection of truth. This is different from ignorance; because in this case, the truth has been clearly made known. The person whose heart has become hardened did at one time understand the truth, but he rejected the truth.

Now what the Apostle Paul wanted his readers to understand in the eleventh chapter of

ROMANS is that God remained faithful to His promise even though Israel has failed to keep her end of the bargain. Despite the ignorance of people, God's covenant remains in force. Despite Israel's deliberate rejection of truth, God's covenant is intact. God's covenant is not limited to any person or group of people. It is universal. And, God's covenant is unchangeable. It is eternal, because it is based on principles laid down before the foundation of the universe. Therefore, God's covenant is glorious! As I have tried to follow the logic of this chapter, these themes have emerged as the major points of my message. Let's examine them one by one.

First of all, let us notice how God has remained faithful to His covenant despite the ignorance of people. When the apostle Paul was trying to make this point, he used his own life and the life of the prophet Elijah as illustrations. As a Pharisee, Paul himself had been ignorant. He had been blinded by the false teachings of his religion. But, Paul's own ignorance and the ignorance of his brethren did not cause God to turn His back on His covenant. In the end, God accepted Paul based on the terms of the covenant and not based on the fact that Paul was a Jew. God's promise, as outlined in the covenant, is to use His grace (made available through the sacrifice of His Son) to make righteous all those who call upon His name to be saved. The fact that many people are ignorant of this truth does not nullify the truth.

In Old Testament times the terms of the covenant were the same. People had to call out to God for help in order to experience His grace. And, only God's grace could make people righteous. The prophet Elijah, in his distress, made a serious mistake. He began to use the outward appearance of things as a standard to measure the status of God's covenant. It is the same kind of mistake we make when we try to measure the spiritual health of our church by looking at attendance records. It was one of the lowest ebbs in Israel's fluctuating history where a pagan queen was dictating the religious policy of the elect nation. The true prophet was being silenced by imperial order. The altars of Jehovah were being torn down and replaced by shrines dedicated to a pagan god. From outward appearances, it seemed to Elijah that he was the only person in Israel that still remained faithful. If he were to be caught and killed, then God would be out of business, and evil men would be successful in thwarting God's purpose.

But Elijah was mistaken and so God corrected and instructed him. God's purpose to save mankind had not been thwarted. There were still seven thousand people in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Compared to the population of a whole nation, seven thousand is not that many. But, it was enough to keep God's purpose for Israel alive. This faithful remnant of 7,000 people would be enough to cause God's covenant to prevail through this present crisis.

In ROMANS 11:5-6, the word "grace" is used four times. The emphasis on grace instead of works is Paul's way of trying to wipe out ignorance. Paul himself had once believed that righteousness must be obtained through works. He was blinded to the truth by the false teaching of his religion. Now he is once again stating the truth that he had already so clearly explained in ROMANS 1-8.

The terms of God's covenant have always been, and still are, grace on God's part and belief on man's part. And, the true children of the covenant are those who believe. Regardless of how bad things get, the covenant will remain intact, because there has always been and will always be at least a remnant of people who believe. Even if the majority of people lose sight of this truth, the truth will remain.

In the next portion of scripture, that is ROMANS 11:7-12 there is a shift in the argument, but the main point remains the same. The shift is from ignorance to hardness of heart. And, the thing that remains the same is God's faithfulness to his covenant. When God instructed Paul and corrected Elijah, they responded by believing. But, that is not always the case.

The reason why Israel rejected the truth about grace when that truth was clearly revealed is because she insisted that the conditions required to receive righteousness be determined by her and not by God. What Israel sought after so hard was a righteousness that was politically and socially conceived. Israel had become a legalistic community

promoting righteousness by ritualism and conformity. What she sought after so earnestly, she was unable to find. But, thank God that there were some who did find righteousness. There were some people who did believe when the truth about God's grace was revealed to them. For the others who did not believe, their hearts became hardened.

Verse 8 describes this hardening of the heart as a "spirit of stupor." Those words really tell it like it is. When a certain person rejects truth that has been revealed to him, that person then loses some of his capacity to recognize and respond to truth. God does not arbitrarily harden the hearts of people. The context of the quote found in verse 8 is [DEUTERONOMY 29:1-6](#). In that Old Testament passage Moses was speaking to people who had been delivered from Egypt and had seen God perform signs and miracles in the wilderness. They had rejected truth that had been clearly revealed to them. They had rejected God's grace.

And, the quote from King David in [ROMANS 11:9-10](#) are words of judgment. King David was not just spouting out curses upon people to ease his own frustration. He was watching people who were boldly attempting to resist God's purposes. And, he was pronouncing the inevitable wrath that would come upon them.

But, despite the fact that so many people from the nation of Israel had rejected truth, God's covenant remained in force. Grace will always be available to the Jew just as it is available to the Gentile. Because this is so, there is even hope that we will someday see a huge number of people from the political and religious nation of Israel embrace Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah and Lord. For the present—when Paul wrote his letter to Rome and even now—Israel's rejection of the truth meant that Paul and others would spend more resources evangelizing to the Gentiles. Israel's loss meant riches for the Gentiles. At the time when Paul wrote his letter, Gentile believers were already recognized as being a majority in the body of Christ.

In [ROMANS 11:13-21](#), there is another shift in Paul's logic, but the main point remains the same. Paul's ministry was to the Gentiles, but Paul did not want his readers to think that God's faithfulness to His covenant depended on the Gentiles any more than it depended on the Jews. Gentiles as well as Jews had to agree to God's terms of the covenant.

There seemed to be a deliberate attempt on Paul's part to arouse envy among the Jewish people of the Roman Empire. Paul was not shy in sharing how God's grace had triumphed over the citadels of paganism. They had fallen, one after another, and there were thousands of Gentiles who could testify how Jesus had changed their lives. It was Paul's hope that his fellow countrymen, even in their jealous state would recognize that what they were seeing was real. If even a few of his Jewish brethren could believe as a result of seeing the testimonies of the Gentiles, that would be like icing on the cake. It would be like seeing life restored to a dead person.

But, Paul also had to warn the believing Gentiles lest they become guilty of the sin of arrogance, which had been the downfall of the Jew. He used the analogy of a tree to warn them. The breaking off of the branches refers to God's judgment toward Jewish unbelief. The "grafting in" of wild olive branches refers to God's acceptance of Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ. The "nourishing sap" from the olive root refers to the grace of eternal-life given to those who believe.

It is absolutely essential for the believing Gentile not forget that it is the root that gives life to the branch and not vice versa. The Gentile is part of the "tree" because of his faith. So godly fear, rather than arrogance, is in order. If God did not spare the elect nation in their arrogance and unbelief, He will certainly not spare the Gentiles if they display the same traits. God's covenant treats everyone the same. It is not limited to any one person or group of people. It is universal.

In the next large segment of [ROMANS 11](#), starting with verse 22 and running through verse 32, God's sovereignty is the predominant theme. The words remind us that God's covenant is based on principles laid down before the foundation of the world. That makes His covenant unchanging.

Verse 22 begins with the words, "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God." "Kindness" is God's response toward those who believe. It is His grace provided in Christ Jesus. And, "sternness" is God's response to those who reject truth. It is His wrath. These are the principles that have been laid down before the foundation of the world that we have seen appear over and over again in Romans: belief and grace, unbelief and wrath. The warning to the Gentile is to "continue in kindness." It is foolish to try to resist the sovereign will of God. No one has ever been able to do it. And, those who have tried have been cut off.

The final outcome of the Jew will not depend on a compromise or a change of mind on God's part. Up until the day this world comes to an end, the terms of the covenant will remain the same as they always have been. Jews will always have an opportunity to enter into covenant with God, but they will have to enter in according to the terms of His eternal principles.

In verses 25-32, the apostle Paul tries to instruct the Gentile believers so that they will not fall into the same trap of ignorance that he and his Jewish kin had fallen into. Satan works overtime to tempt us to become conceited. By becoming large in number, the Gentile believers were now vulnerable to the same temptation that had overcome the nation of Israel during their golden years. It is the temptation of a race to begin thinking that God has chosen them just because they are Jewish or just because they are Gentiles and not because they have believed.

The promises contained in these verses must be interpreted in light of the eternal principles of God's covenant that never change. Verses 25 and 26 tell us that the hardening Israel has and still is experiencing will not last forever. It will last until all the Gentiles who are going to believe have believed. I agree with the Bible scholars who say that these promises are a reference to the end of the age. It doesn't make sense to say that salvation would be closed to the Gentiles before the end. The principles of God's covenant are in tact throughout history. The promise that all Israel will be saved through the deliverance of the One who comes from Zion does not mean that every religious or ethnic Jew will be saved regardless of whether or not he or she has believed. God will not change the terms of his covenant at the end of this age. What it probably means is that there will be a great revival among Jews at the end of the age. And, the revival will be so significant that one will be able to look at the nation as a whole and say that the whole nation has turned to Christ.

Not too long ago, hundreds of school children were killed in Russia at the hands of terrorists. Afterwards, I read in the news that the whole nation of Russia was mourning their deaths. Obviously that does not take in every individual. But, it does mean that the number of people who are mourning is a very large and significant number.

Since Christ's death and resurrection, we have yet to see such a significant number from the Jewish nation turn to Christ. I believe ROMANS 11 is predicting that this will happen at the end of the age. But, regardless of how you interpret the promise, the terms of the covenant remain the same. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (JOHN 14:6)." Righteousness can only come by grace made available through the death of Jesus Christ to those who believe. Those are the eternal terms of the covenant.

So, there are two ways to look at the nation of Israel. One is to consider the nation from the perspective of the gospel, which spells out the eternal principles of salvation. As far as the gospel is concerned, besides grace made available through Jesus Christ to all who believe, there is no other possible way to become righteous. Jews who insist that Christ is not God's way and insist on their own way become opponents or enemies to God's eternal purposes.

The other way to look at Israel is to consider the nation from the viewpoint of her special election to be the custodian of His Word and the channel through which the Messiah would come. Paul is able to declare with confidence that God loves Israel in a special way, different from any other nation. This simply meant that God has chosen Israel to have these special privileges. It does not mean that God requirements for salvation will be

different for Israel than what they are for any other group of people. It is important for all of us believing Gentiles to understand these things lest we overemphasize or under-emphasize the role Israel plays in history.

The words recorded in verses 30-32 are also directed toward Gentile believers. We must be careful not to look down on the Jew for their unbelief. Instead we must see their unbelief as an opportunity to impart mercy. You see; the tables have become reversed. There was once a time when the Gentiles were in a desperate state of unbelief and desperately needed their Jewish neighbors to reveal God's mercy to them. Unfortunately, the nation of Israel (at least for the most part) failed to demonstrate that mercy. Now, the believing Gentiles have the same opportunity and the apostle Paul doesn't want them to miss it. In fact, believing Jews and believing Gentiles alike need to demonstrate mercy to all those who are in a state of unbelief. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Jews and Gentiles alike must learn to live with these eternal and universal principles. Unbelief actually creates an opportunity for God to demonstrate mercy through those who believe.

The apostle Paul ends chapter 11 with words of praise. God deserves all the glory for all that He has done to establish this magnificent covenant. Such a plan of salvation is way beyond man's capability. The "riches" mentioned in verse 33 refer to the abundance of God's resources offered in Christ through the Holy Spirit (EPHESIANS 3:16-19). The wisdom and knowledge of God refers to the way He drew up the plan of salvation and the gracious way He carried out His plan (EPHESIANS 1:7-8; COLOSSIANS 2:4). No human on earth could have planned or executed this gracious salvation. God is in debt to no man. Christ's blood is not a payment of a debt owed by God; it is God's offer of forgiveness to man. The redemption of God's creation past, present, and future comes as a gift from God. He deserves all the glory.

Paul's words of praise that summarize everything God has done not only conclude a chapter, they also conclude a whole section. Paul began with a gospel of which he was not ashamed. He developed his argument that all men need the gospel, because all men have sinned and are under the wrath of God. He went on from there to describe the gospel and how God used His Son to appease the wrath. He talked in detail about the power of grace and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in overcoming the sufferings of this present age. And then he presented the negative predicament of the Jew. It broke his heart to do so, but it was absolutely necessary for his readers to understand how the nation of Israel fits into the scheme of God's salvation.

For many people, it may be years before all of this can be comprehended in such a way as to produce a cry of praise to God for His great salvation. The problem of man's inability to comprehend is not with God's plan of salvation. God's plan of salvation is simple enough for even a child to comprehend. The problem is that our cultural and ethnic and theological biases get in the way and make it difficult for us to understand. And, our past rejection of truth puts our minds in a state of stupor so we cannot comprehend. The problem of the Jew is the same problem that all of us have—we are all lost. And, any future hope for the Jew or any other man will be determined by what he does with the crucified Christ.

