

August 25, 2019
Grace Is Grace
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Romans 11:1-24

11 *Am I saying that God has turned his back on his people? Certainly not! I am one of the people of Israel, and I myself am a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin. ² God did not turn his back on his chosen people. Don't you remember reading in the Scriptures how Elijah complained to God about the people of Israel? ³ He said, "Lord, they killed your prophets and destroyed your altars. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me."*

⁴ But the Lord told Elijah, "I still have seven thousand followers who have not worshiped Baal." ⁵ It is the same way now. God was kind to the people of Israel, and so a few of them are still his followers. ⁶ This happened because of God's undeserved kindness and not because of anything they have done. It could not have happened except for God's kindness.

⁷ This means that only a chosen few of the people of Israel found what all of them were searching for. And the rest of them were stubborn, ⁸ just as the Scriptures say,

*"God made them so stupid
that their eyes are blind,
and their ears
are still deaf."*

*⁹ Then David said,
"Turn their meals
into bait for a trap,
so that they will stumble
and be given
what they deserve.*

*¹⁰ Blindfold their eyes!
Don't let them see.
Bend their backs
beneath a burden
that will never be lifted."*

[Gentiles Will Be Saved]

¹¹ Do I mean that the people of Israel fell, never to get up again? Certainly not! Their failure made it possible for the Gentiles to be saved, and this will make the people of Israel jealous. ¹² But if the rest of the world's people were helped so much by Israel's sin and loss, they will be helped even more by their full return.

¹³ I am now speaking to you Gentiles, and as long as I am an apostle to you, I will take pride in my work. ¹⁴ I hope in this way to make some of my own people jealous enough to be saved. ¹⁵ When Israel rejected God, the rest of the people in the world were able to turn to him. So when God makes friends with Israel, it will be like bringing the dead back to life. ¹⁶ If part of a batch of dough is made holy by being offered to God, then all of the dough is holy. If the roots of a tree are holy, the rest of the tree is holy too.

¹⁷ You Gentiles are like branches of a wild olive tree that were made to be part of a cultivated olive tree. You have taken the place of some branches that were cut away from it. And because of this, you enjoy the blessings that come from being part of that cultivated tree. ¹⁸ But don't think you are better than the branches that were cut away. Just remember that you are not supporting the roots of that tree. Its roots are supporting you.

¹⁹ Maybe you think those branches were cut away, so that you could be put in their place. ²⁰ That's true enough. But they were cut away because they did not have faith, and you are where you are because you do have faith. So don't be proud, but be afraid. ²¹ If God cut away those natural branches, couldn't he do the same to you?

²² Now you see both how kind and how hard God can be. He was hard on those who fell, but he was kind to you. And he will keep on being kind to you, if you keep on trusting in his kindness. Otherwise, you will be cut away too.

²³ If those other branches will start having faith, they will be made a part of that tree again. God has the power to put them back. ²⁴ After all, it wasn't natural for branches to be cut from a wild olive tree and to be made part of a cultivated olive tree. So it is much more likely that God will join the natural branches back to the cultivated olive tree. (Contemporary English Version)

We're about to start another remodeling project at our house, which reminds me of the book I once owned called *Kitchen Redos, Revamps, Remodels and Replacements: Without Murder, Madness, Suicide or Divorce*. As soon as our kitchen was done I got rid of the book, because it was too creepy-realistic. The central premise of the book was this: *Retrofitting anything is always much harder and far more complicated than starting from scratch; so unless you really, really, really love your house, don't do it – just move.*

The Apostle Paul really, really, really loved his house. The Temple, the synagogue, Judaism. And he worked for thirty years trying to retrofit it to include Christ-followers – both Jews and non-Jews worshipping Christ and serving the gospel together within the larger house, if you will, of Judaism.

Different sects (as in sections) of Judaism already existed in Paul's time: Zealots and Pharisees and Samaritans. The same is true today. If you are ever in Jerusalem, you'll see all flavors of Judaism – some religious, some not. Even the most religious Jews, the Orthodox, have sorted themselves out into different sects. There are Orthodox Jews whose socks and pant legs are indicative of the sect they are part of: black socks, white socks, short socks, high socks, pant legs outside of socks, pant legs tucked into the socks.

So Paul's idea of another new sect wasn't that far out, except for the part about including Gentiles. In the end, that was the deal breaker.

Nearly a hundred years after Paul preached and wrote, along came the suggestion of describing the Christian church as non-Jewish altogether. In effect, it mostly was already. No doubt there were anti-Semitic intentions therein. But had he lived to see it, Paul would have protested. He preached and worked his heart out and he didn't get his way – obviously. But imagine if he had.

Obviously we can't account for lots of other maybes, but we're just pretending anyway – so let's try. If Paul had gotten his way, we wouldn't be here, but we might be next door. On any given weekend next door at Beth Shalom, just like now, the Reformed Congregation meets for worship on Friday evenings. They are the liberal Jews who are cool with having a woman rabbi. The Conservative congregation worships on Saturday mornings. And the Orthodox congregation has their own place near campus. If Paul had had his way, we'd be worshipping over there on Sunday mornings with the other Gentiles and the Christ-following Jews – just one big happy Jewish religion.

Think of the real estate that would be available – just in this town! Just imagine. Had Paul gotten his way: no Catholics and Protestants; no Baptists, Presbyterians or Methodists; no Episcopalians, Pentecostals or Lutherans.

What else? Of course there would be other stories to tell. But think of all the blank pages in our history books. No Crusades! What would Billy Graham revivals have been called without the Christian crusades to annihilate the Muslims? No Roman Inquisition. No Portuguese Inquisition. No Spanish Inquisition. Would there have been an Enlightenment? A Renaissance? Think of the books and the movies we'd have missed, if Paul had gotten his way. We owe him everything; and still, Paul didn't get his way.

Only in glimpses and glances does the church reflect the Oneness of Christ for which Paul gave everything. So here we are – next-door neighbors and friends, mostly. I say “mostly,” because New Testament texts like Romans 11 are divisive between us and must be handled respectfully. For his part, I'm not sure Paul would be so much *disappointed* as *glad* it isn't his problem anymore. He did the best that he knew, in the time that he lived, with the information he had. It wasn't his fault folks didn't follow his lead. After all, not even Jesus gets his way in our lives all the time, amen?

Are you – am I? – the people we would be if Jesus were getting Jesus's way in our lives? Probably not. So we gather: to tell ourselves the truth before God; to be encouraged by the word; to enjoy the taste of the grace that makes us hunger and thirst for more; and, hopefully, to leave here week after week a little bit braver and a little more ready for Jesus to have his way in our lives and in our life together. I'd like us to pray together and

then take just a few minutes' consideration of Paul's address in chapter 11, which I am calling "Grace Is Grace."

We are yours, we say, O God. Give us a glimpse of what a life that might be, we pray. Amen.

Chapter 11 is Paul's mic drop. In speaking to the Jews, he speaks to every dominant group in every human society everywhere: "You can share your privilege, and I promise you won't die." In speaking to Gentiles, he speaks to every marginalized, disinherited people made to feel *less than* – not for anything they've done but by virtue of their birth. "Knowing you are equally loved by God does not entitle you to lord over anyone, including those who oppress you."

If that doesn't sound like you, you are in Group One. Jews were the first privileged Christians. Somebody had to go first. With the privilege comes the responsibility – amen? – the responsibility in this case to *go tell*, which those first Jews were assigned by Jesus himself. Go where? to the ends of the earth. And do what? and make disciples of whom? all nations. And what do you remember from sermon after sermon, about the word for "all nations"? *Ethne*. Gentiles.

That's us, friends. Welcome to the ends of the earth. I remember being a kid and learning all about the *ends of the earth*. That's where our missionaries went, carrying Jesus from here to there. Always east: to Europe, the Middle East; to Africa, the Far East; to China. The heroes – like Adoniram Judson and Lottie Moon. Somebody tell me who [Lottie Moon](#) was.

I went to Baptist Sunday School from bed babies to the college class, twenty-two years of Sunday School class. But it was not in Sunday School but a history class at Arkansas State University that my understanding of *the ends of the earth* came completely undone.

The gospel was not first dispensed in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania or in Richmond, Virginia. In fact, it was first dispensed in the East and it traveled west. We were literally almost the LAST to know. And somehow we ended up thinking we were first and that it was our job to get the gospel shipped overseas before the whole world went to hell for our neglect. We are the ends of the earth and would do well to remember it – to remember Paul was talking to us in Ephesians 2, where he wrote:

So then, remember . . . you Gentiles by birth . . . remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh, he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the

law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,

as well as in Romans 11. For, not only are we the Jews so prone to use our power to exclude, we are also these Gentiles so prone to lord over others as if we were the first, rather than the very last guests to arrive at this party, skidding through the doors of the banquet hall as they are closing once and for all. My favorite preaching teacher, Fred Craddock, was fond of saying, *“Wherever and whenever and for whatever reason anyone is not welcome to sit at table with you, to eat with you, then you do not have church.”*

How easily, friends, how easily do we equate sharing with having less? Because we have not yet caught the vision and the scent of our Oneness in Christ, that only when our siblings are welcome do we have any grasp of the gospel, of God’s welcome of our sorry selves. Either everyone eats or everyone starves. Unless we are one, we are alone, clinging to a fantasy.

Apart from Christ, what do we have worth clinging to? Joined with Christ, there is no end to grace. So why do we cling to what we cannot keep? And why do we fear losing what we know, in our heart of hearts, can never be taken from us? We cling, because living by faith is really, really hard. Trusting in the truth, acting on the truth we cannot see and hear, is never, ever the easier, simpler life choice. The world doesn’t reward us for it – sometimes quite the opposite – because we are few in number too, which can make faith in the unseen sometimes feel all the crazier.

Paul uses the example of Elijah, who was so discouraged and sick of faith he told God he was the last living prophet on earth. God told Elijah to stop being so dramatic (that is in the “extended edition” of Romans), because in fact there were still 7000 faithful prophets left in Israel. But it can feel that way sometimes, can’t it? Like the world is going to hell this very day, and it literally does not matter if you try to be faithful or not.

Paul goes on relating his theory of how the Jews’ rejection of the Christ opened the doors for the Gentiles’ inclusion. And if such an awesome outcome could come from their lack of faith, just imagine what might happen if they were to turn that ship around and start doing as they ought. But in the question he answers I can hear a hint of that same fear that is so constant in our socio-political lives now. Radicalism and even violence is an everyday occurrence now, sparked in no small part by a culture’s fear of losing our place in the world. “Identitarianism” is one word for it, white supremacy retrofitted for an extremely sensitive culture. It’s easy for us to brush aside such thinking as ignorant – low-class, even. Though we wouldn’t say that. Think it maybe, but not say it. However, the Christian question is *“Are they welcome?”* and *“will we be church?”*

Grace is grace is grace, Paul says, or we are not church. Let us be church, friends, today and in all the days God gives us. Shall we pray?