

THERE'S HOPE AHEAD

by Ray C. Stedman

The eleventh chapter of Romans deals very strongly with Israel -- its hope, its promises, and its relationship to the church.

I think everyone here knows that Hanukkah and Christmas are celebrated at the same time of the year. They have something in common, in that Hanukkah is a celebration of the cleansing of the temple for the ultimate coming of the Messiah, whom the Jews expected would come to the nation of Israel, while Christmas celebrates the actual coming of that Messiah to a sinful, weary, and waiting world. I think these two ceremonies, very diverse in nature, nevertheless symbolize the close relationships that the nation of Israel has with the church of the living God.

We must never forget those relationships, and I think this chapter, perhaps more than any other passage of Scripture, will help us in understanding that.

Unfortunately, the church and Israel are often like two relatives who can't get along with each other. Through the centuries, disagreement and outright persecution and unhappy situations have prevailed. But chapter eleven of Romans gives us some very helpful insights into how to live with our Jewish friends and neighbors.

Twice in this passage the Apostle Paul asks the question "Did God reject his people?" That is, is God through with Israel because of their rejection of the person of Jesus and the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ? Because they turned a deaf ear to that, has God wiped them out? Has he said they no longer have any place in his scheme of things?

Twice Paul raises that question here, and twice he answers it: "By no means!" That is, God is not through with the Jews. Anyone who teaches that the church has now inherited all the promises of Israel had better take a second look at the Scriptures, especially the eleventh chapter of Romans. It is amazing how many people take all the blessings and glories that were promised to Israel in the Old Testament and apply them to the church, but take all the cursings and all the punishments and apply those to Israel. That does not treat the Scriptures fairly. So let's take a look at Paul's answer to the question "Does God reject his people?"

I ask then, Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. {Rom 11:1-2a NIV}

Those among the Jews whom God foreknew, he did not reject. Paul is the great example of that. Here we have clear evidence that God has never set aside the Jews, in respect to individual salvation. Through all the Christian centuries Jews have been coming to Christ, coming back to God, coming into the fulfillment of the promises of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul is an excellent example of this. Notice how he refers to himself as one of those foreknown, i.e., one of the elect, one whom God had set aside to be his. In the letter to the Galatians the apostle reminds us that this was done from his mother's womb, so that all through those years of resistance and pharisaical anger at the claims of Jesus, when Paul was persecuting the church and "breathing out threatenings and slaughter" {Acts 9:1 KJV}, Paul was, nevertheless, one of the elect. Though he was struggling, he was one whom God inexorably was drawing to himself -- and Paul never forgot that. In every one of his letters he marvels at the grace of God that took him, a blasphemer and persecutor of the church, and drew him to himself, changed his heart, and made him into a new creature in Christ. He is but one example of the many millions of Jews through the centuries who have believed in Christ.

But even that does not exhaust the position of Israel in God's program. Not only do some Jews become

Christian, but there are many who remain Jews who, nevertheless, are born again, saved individuals. Paul cites an example from the prophet Elijah:

Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah -- how 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." And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. {Rom 11:2b-6 NIV}

There was a time in the life of the prophet Elijah when he thought he was the only one left. It was after that tremendous encounter with the priests of Baal, recorded in First Kings 18, when fire came down from heaven and wiped out all the sacrifices. Queen Jezebel mounted a persecution against all the prophets of God, including Elijah, and brought Elijah to the place where he felt that he was the only one left.

Have you ever felt like that? "O Lord, they have all left you. I'm the only one left. I'm the only one who's faithful," {cf, 1 Ki 19:10-14}. Have you ever felt that way? That was how Elijah felt. But God said, "Elijah, your computer is broken. You only see one left; I see seven thousand who have not yet bowed the knee to Baal. I have kept them from it. I have reserved to myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal," {cf, 1 Ki 19:18}.

Elijah, like many of us, made a lot of mistakes. First, he forgot about man's limited knowledge about any subject. We don't see very clearly; we don't understand all the issues. I do not think there is anything that we know everything about. Therefore our knowledge as to what is happening is always to be taken with a grain of salt. It is never as bad as it looks, no matter how bad it may get in these coming years -- and it may get bad. But it will never be as bad as it looks, because our knowledge does not encompass all the ones who remain faithful.

Second, Elijah forgot about God's unlimited power. The situation is never as bad as it looks because God is never as weak as he seems. Sometimes we think that God must have lost the battle, that the powers of darkness are so strong and violent and so in command that God has given up. But when we think that way, we have forgotten what the Scriptures tell us again and again -- that it is the very opposition of the enemy that God is using to bring about his purposes. Never forget that. God cannot lose because he uses the very opposition against him to win. Elijah had no reason to despair.

Third, Elijah forgot about life's unmixable principles. If salvation is by grace, then it can't be by works. And if it is by works, then it can't be grace. Grace, you see, is God at work. Works is man at work. The processes of salvation are much less complex than they appear. We think we have to earn our way to heaven. I find this revealed in the thinking of many Christians.

A man said to me the other day, "Why should this happen to me? What have I done that I should have to go through this kind of a trial?" I realized that I had said the same thing not long before. That kind of thinking reveals that I really thought that I had put God in my debt, that I had somehow earned something, and deserved something better from him. Now, that is works, and Paul reminds us here that you cannot mix works and grace.

If God is going to call you and save you and deliver you, then it is not going to depend on your works. As James points out, your works will be there if your faith is real, because it is faith that produces works. But the works aren't the saving factor. That is what Elijah forgot.

So there were thousands in Paul's day, and there are thousands of Jews today, who perhaps have never really heard about Jesus. I think there are many Jews today who are earnest, devout, humble souls, trusting in the Old Testament record, who have never really heard anything about Jesus that would make them feel that he really is their Messiah. And yet they have believed what is revealed in the Old Testament about the Messiah. There are probably hundreds of thousands of Jews today who are still faithful believers in the only bit of Christ that they know -- that which is revealed in the Old Testament.

At any rate, Paul has made it clear that God is not rejecting individuals out of Israel. And yet the majority are turning away (Verse 7):

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written:

**"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes so that they could not see
and ears so that they could not hear,
to this very day."**

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 that they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever." {Rom 11:7-10 NIV}**

Now, those are horrible words, but they represent the reaction that God has determined should accompany unbelief. When you hear truth, it is always very important that you do something about it. If you know something is true, then you had better act on it. If you don't, you lose your capacity to recognize truth. Gradually the dry rot that is described here, that is so visibly evident among many in Israel today, will set in. Paul calls it a blindness. Their eyes are blinded, so that even when the truth is there they cannot see it. Their ears are deaf. Even when loving appeals and warnings are set before them, they don't hear them. Their table, their food, becomes a snare and a trap, leading into slavery.

The food of Israel referred to here is the Law, the Scriptures. Jews highly value the Law. Now, they don't know a lot about it. Many Jews today are hardly acquainted with anything in the Old Testament. The rabbis have given themselves to the study of it, and yet all that intensive study only seems to make them sink deeper and deeper into the trap of legalistic slavery. They are bound by rituals and spend their days constantly working out interpretative details.

Not long ago I was reading about Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister among the Nazis, who, on one occasion, asked a Jewish rabbi to teach him how the Jews approached the Scriptures. "I understand that you Jews have a peculiar way of reasoning when you come to the Talmud and the Torah (the Old Testament), and I want you to teach it to me." The rabbi said, "I'm sorry, but you're too old for that." "What do you mean?" he asked. "Well," the rabbi told him, "we have three questions we ask a boy before he enters into the study of the Talmud. If he can answer them, we let him into the study. If he can't, he has no chance." Goebbels said, "Ask them of me. What's the first question?"

The rabbi said, "The first question is this: Two men fall down a chimney; one comes out clean and the other is dirty, which one washes?" Dr. Goebbels said, "Oh, that's easy. The dirty one washes, of course." The rabbi said, "Wrong. It is the clean one that washes." "How do you reason that?" The rabbi said, "When they fall down the chimney, they look at each other, and the dirty one sees the clean one, so he thinks he is clean, too; but the clean one sees the dirty one and thinks he is dirty, so he washes." "All right," Goebbels said, "there is a strange logic about that. But give me the second question."

"The second question is this: Two men fall down a chimney. One comes out dirty, and the other clean. Which one washes?" Goebbels said, "That's the same question." "No it isn't, it's an entirely different question." "Well," Goebbels said, "I think I can answer that. It is the clean one that washes." The rabbi said, "Wrong. They look at each other. The dirty one looks at the clean one and says, 'Isn't it wonderful that two men can fall down a chimney and come out clean?' But the clean one looks at the dirty one and says, 'Look how dirty we've gotten.' And the dirty man holds up his hands and sees that they are dirty. So he washes."

Goebbels says, "What's the third question?" "Two men fall down a chimney..." Goebbels says, "That's the same one!" "No it isn't," the rabbi says, "it's an entirely different problem! What's the answer?" Goebbels said, "I don't know." The rabbi said, "Neither of them wash because it is a ridiculous story to begin with! How could two men fall down a chimney and one come out dirty and the other clean? So unless a boy can answer those questions, we never admit him to the Talmud."

It is this kind of strange, penetrating, and yet difficult reasoning that accounts for much of Jewish unbelief. I have here a paper printed and distributed by Jewish rabbis in which the differences between Christianity and Judaism are described. One rabbi writes about Paul:

Paul claimed that obedience to the Torah (the Law) could not guarantee salvation; rather, salvation was obtainable only through acceptance of and faith in Christ Jesus. To believe that a person could atone for his own sinful condition through any efforts on his own, as, for example, by obeying the laws of the Torah, was accordingly a delusion. But Paul eagerly announced that what man could not himself accomplish, namely salvation, could still be accomplished for him. Only God, however, was powerful enough to atone for man's sinfulness, and Paul held that the death of Christ Jesus was that act of divine atonement.

Then he adds,

We Jews have rejected this Gentile Christian view. Judaism, as shaped by our rabbis in Palestine, conceived of the body as a gift of God, and to this day we regard the body as holy and wholesome, not as a prison from which to escape. Any inclination by man to commit a wrongdoing, we hold, resides not in his body but in his heart or mind. And this inclination can be overcome by a change of heart or mind. Thus man, by himself, does indeed possess the power to atone for his own misdeeds, and we Jews have, in our Torah, the guidance directing our hearts and minds to righteous living.

On that basis, the Jews say, they can win their way to acceptance before God without dealing with the sin problem and without ever taking into consideration the full teaching of the Scriptures. Paul says, therefore, that many have been rejected because of that.

Now he takes up the second question (Verse 11):

Again I ask, "Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" Not at all! {Rom 11:11a NIV}

This question deals with the national promises of Israel. Individually, in any age, Jews can come to Christ, and have. But what about the national promises God gave to Israel? Has the nation lost those? By no means! Paul gives us five arguments to prove that Israel must someday become a godly nation once again, and become the leading nation of earth:

The first argument is that the salvation of the Gentiles was intended to reach Israel (Verse 11):

Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. {Rom 11:11b NIV}

If you have read the book of Acts, you know that everywhere Paul went he began his ministry with the Jews. It was only when the Jews would refuse to hear that he would turn to the Gentiles. So, in all these cities, the Gentiles were blessed and enriched by his ministry only because the Jews had refused it. Gentiles were allowed to believe and to become different people in order to make the Jews jealous.

Do you know what that tells me? That tells me that we Christians ought to be so alive, so vital in our Christianity, so excited and full of joy and love toward one another that every Jew we contact will say to himself, "How come they have it and we don't? How come they have a light on their faces and joy and love in their hearts?" We have to hang our heads in shame and admit that through the centuries there has been very little in the church to attract the jealousy of Israel. It has been the other way around. But Paul says this was God's intention, that the Gentiles should become so alive as to awaken the Jews.

Paul's second argument is that Israel must ultimately return to God because worldwide blessing will come only when that happens (Verses 12-15):

But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be, but life from the dead? {Rom 11:12-15 NIV}

When I was at the Congress for World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland, a couple of years ago, I was moved to see that every nation on earth was represented at that congress. The gospel had in some way penetrated every nation on the face of the earth. To some degree, at least, the riches of the gospel had come to every single nation. Now, those riches really speak not of material prosperity, but of freedom, the human spirit made free. It is a fact today -- you can take your globe and check it -- that everywhere the gospel is freely proclaimed, you have a free people. But where it is resisted or rejected or ignored, you have people drifting into violence, anarchy, exploitation, and tyranny. This is because human freedom comes by means of the gospel. We in the Gentile world ought to give thanks to God for the riches that have come our way because of the blindness of Israel.

But Paul's argument is this: If that kind of riches has come because of the Jews' rejection, what will it be like in the day when Israel comes again into its proper position? According to the prophets, that is the time when the earth shall blossom like the rose, when there shall be no more war, "nothing to hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain" {cf, Isa 11:9}, when the earth shall move into a golden era. Israel is the key. That is why every Christian should keep his eye on that remarkable people and see what is happening to them.

Paul's third argument is found in Verse 16:

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. {Rom 11:16 NIV}

Now, it would take a good Jew to really understand this. Paul is referring to the offerings and sacrifices in the tabernacle. For the offering of the firstfruits, a pile of dough was made up, and someone would take a handful of it and present it to God. Paul's argument is that if that first handful was acceptable and holy before God, the rest of the dough would be too. Now, the firstfruit here is Abraham, the father of the Israel nation. Abraham was accepted before God; therefore his descendants will be too. They are not cut off from God or from his relationship with them; they are claimed by God.

Paul's fourth argument has to do with the olive tree (Verses 17-21):

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. {Rom 11:17-21 NIV}

Once again Abraham is symbolized by the olive tree. The New Testament tells us that when a Gentile becomes a Christian, he, in a sense, becomes a son of Abraham. He becomes an Israelite. But when a Jew becomes a Christian, he doesn't have to become a Gentile. You see, the natural fruit of the olive tree is the Jews. It is we who are grafted in.

C. S. Lewis put it this way: "In a sense, the converted Jew is the only normal human being in the world." What do you think of that? He goes on, "Everyone else is, from one point of view, a special case dealt with under emergency conditions." That's how we got in. God sort of opened the back door and let us in as an emergency case. But the ones who really belong are the Jews. It is healthy for Gentile Christians to remember that. The Jews are not hanging around waiting for us to be nice to them. It is they who have been nice to us. We ought to remember that and respond with gratitude and humility to what God has done in placing us in this olive tree.

Now, Paul's last argument is found in Verses 22-24:

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? {Rom 11:22-24 NIV}

The olive tree is the position of the faith of Abraham, the position of receiving blessing from the God of the earth through sheer grace, without any merit on our own part. According to Paul here, we who were like a wild olive tree, with hard, shriveled up, bitter fruit, were taken and grafted into this rich olive tree. But what happens is contrary to what happens in nature.

If you take a nectarine branch and graft it into a peach tree, what does the branch grow from then on -- peaches or nectarines? It still grows nectarines. The fruit is determined by the branch, not by the tree. The peach tree will grow nectarines on a nectarine branch, and plums on a plum branch, and so on. That is what happens according to nature. Following Paul's analogy here, if we, a wild olive branch, were grafted into a rich cultivated olive tree, the fruit that would continue to grow would be the wild olives, bitter and shriveled, that which we already were producing. But God does a miracle with us. He changes us so that the fruit that comes forth is the fruit of the Spirit, and we begin to produce the rich, wonderful, fat fruit of the good olive tree in our lives. Again, Paul argues, if God can do that with bitter fruit such as we Gentile believers are, how much more will he produce richness with the true branches?

Then Paul speaks of the kindness and the severity of God. I want to close on that note, because it recognizes what determines how God appears to you. If you come to God needy and repentant and acknowledging that you need help, you will always find him to be a loving, gracious, open-armed, open-hearted Sovereign, ready to help you, ready to forgive you, ready to give you all that you need. But if you come to God complaining, excusing yourself, justifying what you've been doing and trying to make it look good in his sight, you will always find that God is as hard as iron, and as merciless as fire, as stern as a judge. God will always turn that face toward those who come in self-pride and justification in their own strength.

This is the secret of the mystery of Israel and its blindness today. As long as the Jews come to God in that manner, they will always find a hard, iron-willed, stern God. But when they come in repentance, and, as Zechariah the prophet describes, when Jesus appears and they look at him whom they had pierced and they ask him "Where did you get these wounds in your hands?" he will say, "These are those which I received in the house of my friends," {cf, Zech 13:6}. Then they will mourn for him as one mourns for any only child, and the mourning of Israel that day will be like the mourning for King Joash in the battle of Jezreal. The whole nation will mourn. Then God will take that nation, and they will replenish the earth.

This is what Paul looks forward to.

Now, as we come to the close of a year, and look on to the beginning of a new one, I think this is a reminder to our own hearts of the faithfulness of God. His promises will not fail. God's purposes will never be shortchanged. God is going to accomplish all that he says he will do. Though it may be a long way around, and though it may lead through many trials and temptations and hurts and heartaches, what God has said he will do, he will carry through.

On that basis we can enter this new year with a deep awareness of the faithfulness of our God.

Prayer

Thank you, Holy Father, for your faithfulness. Thank you that you are the God of glory and the God of mercy, and also the God of justice and the God of truth. We do stand amazed at both the kindness and the severity of God. Lord, teach us that you are not someone we can manipulate and wind around our finger, someone to do things for us and run errands for us. Help us bow before you in humble adoration at the grace that reaches out to us when we are

ready to admit our need and come before you trembling and contrite. Thank you, Lord, that you love us and have drawn us to yourself. We pray for our Jewish friends, and ask that they, too, may have their eyes opened to see this beloved One who has come in their midst to be their Redeemer, who has power to set them free and to bring them into beauty and truth and fulfillment such as men have never dreamed of before. Help us to be faithful and loving to them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: There's Hope Ahead
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Exhibited
Scripture: Romans 11:1-24
Message No: 27
Catalog No: 3527
Date: December 26, 1976

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