



God's Unstoppable Plan

Lesson 14 | Romans 11:1-24

Does it ever seem like God's program has failed? Maybe you watched a ministry leader who invested heavily in you flame out in disgrace or give up on the faith. Perhaps you watched in disbelief as the family in which you grew up serving the Lord began to fall apart at the seams. Maybe it was the demise of a ministry that was important to you, shutting its doors either because there was no one left supporting them or because of disgraceful behavior. Believers are often disappointed and at times disillusioned when they watch the work of God fall apart and begin asking themselves the question, "Has God failed?"

Paul was talking to Christian Jews who couldn't help thinking God's program had failed, but for them the problem was much worse. Their Messiah, whom God had promised repeatedly to send, had at last come. Yet imagine the confusion when He was then rejected by their fellow Jews. God had made special promises to Israel, and it looked like those promises would fail. Was God's plan failing? Did this cancel out His promises? Whatever doubts we might have about God's plan and His promises, these first-century Jewish Christians were wrestling through the failure of *specific* promises to *them* seemingly not coming true. If Paul can help these Christians see God's faithfulness through confusing situations, what he says can certainly be of help to us.

What would you say to someone who is discouraged because from their perspective it looks like God's work has failed?

Why doesn't God make it so that all those who follow Him are successful in all their endeavors?

Paul began these three chapters by asking if God's Word has failed, specifically the promises that God made to Israel. He then gives five reasons why it hasn't. (1) Simply because someone's parents are Jews doesn't mean that they are part of God's people; it's never worked that way (9:6-13). (2) God has a right to choose whom He will show mercy to and whom He will harden (9:14-29). (3) Israel is responsible for their rejection of the gospel because they went about getting righteousness the wrong way, and they knew better because God had told them (9:30-10:21). Now as we come to chapter 11, Paul realizes that even if all of this is true it's really hard to accept that God has totally quit on His people. Is He really done with Israel? Because if He is, what about the promises to the patriarchs?

Paul answers this question with an immediate answer and an ultimate answer. The immediate answer is that no, God is not done with the Jews, because He is working through a remnant. The ultimate answer, though, is that God still has a future plan for Israel in which the whole nation will eventually embrace the gospel.

God Still Has a Remnant in Israel

The first argument Paul brings forward to argue that God is not forever done with Israel is, well, himself! God hasn't abandoned all Jews. There are still some, such as Paul, who have embraced the gospel. This is consistent with God's working throughout the history of Israel – there has always been a remnant.

Even today most of the world (and our country) doesn't follow God. Why do you think God prefer to work with a remnant?

Observation: God has saved some Jews (11:1-2a).

Paul once again anticipates how some people might misunderstand everything he has said so far. "Paul, does this mean God is done with Israel?" Once again, Paul makes it abundantly clear that is not what he is saying. But how can this be? If the Jews as a whole have rejected the gospel, how can Paul then say that God has not rejected His people? The answer is that God has saved some Jews, including himself. But maybe that seems a bit too convenient. "God hasn't abandoned the Jews, because a small number *have* accepted the Messiah!" But someone might argue that God has always worked through the nation of Israel as a whole, right?

Example: God reminded Elijah there was a remnant (11:2a-4)

Actually, no. God has often worked through a remnant. To remind his audience of this fact, Paul goes back to one of the darkest moments in Israel's history, yet paradoxically one of the moments when God was most active. Elijah had called for a drought after the nation began following Baal. Eventually this led to a showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. After watching him call down fire from heaven to burn the water-soaked sacrifices, the nation joined Elijah in taking out the false prophets of Baal. Yet once the wicked queen Jezebel found out what happened and threatened Elijah's life, he fled in terror.

Why do you think this particular threat from Jezebel came as such a blow to Elijah?

Demoralized and hopeless, Elijah fled to the south and bitterly complained to God that he was the only one left. No doubt many of God's children throughout the ages have felt alone. Paul felt alone as he watched most of his fellow countrymen reject Christianity. Missionaries, church leaders, faithful congregants in dying churches, many have found themselves wondering where God is and why they seem to be the only one who cares. But God's answer to Elijah, and to us, is that there is a whole lot going on that we don't know about. In Elijah's case, God had 7,000 people who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah wasn't alone. He wasn't even close to being alone. But he didn't know everything God was up to because he wasn't God and didn't have the whole picture.

Why do we so often forget that God is at work in other places and in other ways than the ones we know?

How can realizing that God is working in ways we don't see be an encouragement to us?

Principle: God has chosen a remnant (11:5-10)

In this final section, Paul further explains the idea of a chosen remnant by observing that those who are chosen are chosen by grace. Connecting back to end of chapter 9, he demonstrates that those who are part of the small band that God has saved and is working through didn't receive that position by doing good works. Those who are chosen as God's people are chosen because of God's grace, and because of God's grace alone. You can't be good enough or clever enough or righteous enough to earn a place in the

kingdom. And those who ignore God's grace and instead try to live good enough by their works will be disappointed.

Why do people resist the idea of God's grace being all that is necessary for salvation? Why do people insist on doing good works as a part of salvation?

Sadly, those who insist on obtaining salvation their own way will only become further entrenched in their rebellion. Once again Paul returns to the Old Testament to show that God's judicial hardening – His work of further blinding those who have rejected Him – is something that once again has been the case for Israel all throughout her history. Israel has historically rejected God and His Word, and so part of God's judgment is cementing them in their own ways (much as he did with the pagans, cf Romans 1:18-31).

Why does God react in such anger to those who reject His Word?

What warning can we take from such somber passages?

God Has a Future Plan for Ethnic Israel (11:11-24)

God hasn't abandoned Israel because He continues to work through a remnant. But is that all? Will God ever again work with the entire nation of Israel, or will He only save a small handful of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's descendants? Paul answers this by stating that God's future plan includes salvation for all Israel. This is important for Israel as well as for us because it means that God's promises to the patriarchs will be fulfilled. It's also important for us because it should humble us and cause us to desire the salvation of the Jewish people.

God Plan plans to use the Gentiles to win Israel back (11:11-16)

God loves to take unexpected twists in carrying out His plans. In so doing, He ultimately demonstrates His wisdom and undercuts human pride in the process (cf 1 Corinthians 1:23-31). Here we see that Israel's rejection of the Messiah had the unexpected effect of releasing the blessings of the gospel to the nations. Yet part of the reason for this releasing of the blessings of the gospels to the nations was to provoke Israel to jealousy so that she would come back to the Lord. This means that Paul, an apostle to the Gentiles, sought to win as many Gentiles as possible out of love for Israel. He knew that one way God would work to bring Israel back was by showing them what they were missing out on by continuing to reject the Messiah.

How can believers show unbelievers the tremendous difference the gospel makes in their lives?

How can we as Christians demonstrate to the Jewish people in particular the blessings of knowing Christ?

Paul ends this passage with an interesting question. If Israel's rejection of the Messiah led to the gospel going out to the nations, how much better will it be once they accept it? Paul is operating on the understanding that Israel's obedience is the key that unlocks God's blessings for the whole world. God had promised Abraham that through his descendants the whole world would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). If that blessing goes out even though they reject their Messiah, imagine the blessing once they accept Him! Once Israel as a whole turns and accepts their Messiah, Jesus, the kingdom that God has promised will come.

How might such an understanding impact the way that Christians view unbelieving Jews?

Gentiles should beware becoming proud of their election (11:17-24)

Part of Israel's problem was that they had become arrogant by the fact that they were God's specially chosen people. Instead of being a light and showing the other nations the wonder and beauty and splendor of their God (cf Deuteronomy 4:6-8), they had instead become arrogant and self-focused. Now the roles had been switched. The Gentiles had received the gospel and the Jews found themselves on the outside of God's current work in the world. As Paul looked at this situation, he became concerned that what happened to Israel could also happen to the church. As Israel had once become arrogant in their position, so the church might reject Israel out of a misplaced sense of spiritual superiority.

Paul draws this out in an extended metaphor. God's work is pictured as an olive tree, in which Israel was a natural branch. Yet Israel was cut off because they did not believe, and the Gentiles who did believe were grafted in.¹ Now Paul warns the church that they were grafted in because of their faith and Israel was cut out because of their unbelief. Once again, the key is how one responds to the gospel. And if God is able to graft a wild plant (Gentiles) into a domesticated one, how much easier would it be to graft the original plant back in! This means that Gentiles had better not boast that they are better than Israel.

Why do you think Paul was concerned about Gentile boasting? How might this temptation to boast show itself in the church today?

Sadly, the history of Christianity has frequently ignored this warning of Paul. The ugly stain of antisemitism has led to awful acts of violence and prejudice against the Jewish people throughout the history of the church. Christianity has become, for the most part, a Gentile religion. Yet the purpose of Gentile acceptance is to win back the Jewish people for Christ. That's pretty hard to do to a group that you are persecuting.

Why do you think Christians throughout history have ignored these clear warnings? What lesson should we learn from this history?

Although we'll talk about this more in our next lesson, Paul will eventually conclude that God's plan will succeed and all Israel will be saved (11:26). To disillusioned Jews who were ready to believe Jesus was the Messiah but had a hard time accepting that Israel as a whole rejected Him, Paul made two final arguments. First, God always works with a remnant; and second, God has a future plan. Paul repeatedly points back to Scripture to argue that this has been God's plan, even if the way it is unfolding is not what would be expected.

For Christians living in the 21st century who might similarly wonder why God's plan doesn't seem to be going forward, we can look to the same principles that Paul lays out here. First, God is doing more than we can see. All of us can feel like Elijah, where in the moment we think that everything God is doing is through us or our little group, and we forget that what God is doing much bigger thing than just what we can see. God is working with a remnant. That's never bothered Him, and it need not bother us. But God

¹ This refers to an agriculture practice where a cut is made in a plant and a different branch is placed inside it and wrapped so that the two can be fused together. For a fuller description of this practice, see www.thespruce.com/what-does-grafting-mean-4125565

also has a plan for the future. His kingdom will come and His will is ultimately going to be done. We don't have to worry; we can trust that His plan will succeed. That may not mean we forget the pain of disappointment in the present (it didn't for Paul), but it does mean that even when we are disappointed we can have hope for the future.

How can recognizing that God is working through the little things be an encouragement to believers?

How can recognizing God's ultimate victory be an encouragement to believers?