



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Through Their Trespass

Romans 11:7-15

Fr. William Klock

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As we began Romans 11 last week, Paul asked the question, “Has God rejected his people? Are we to say that God is finished with Israel?” Paul’s been rehearsing the argument he no doubt had in synagogue after synagogue with fellow Jews who were unbelievers—but this time to make a point to the Gentile Christians in Rome. God’s righteousness—his faithfulness to his covenant promises to his people—is revealed in the good news about Jesus. But then what about the unbelief of the majority of the Jews. They rejected Jesus. “How does that work?” someone asks. And Paul has answered that it’s all part of the plan. “So, has God rejected his own people?” this critic now asks. “By no means!” Paul responds. In the first few verses we looked at last week, Paul pointed to himself as proof that God has not rejected his people. Paul was as anti-Jesus as they came, but God got hold of him. In fact, Jesus himself came to Paul. Jesus himself sought out Paul, the obstinate Hebrew of Hebrews. That’s proof right there that God isn’t finished with his people.

And yet, Paul admits: the nation is finished. That day when the people cried out to Pilate, “Crucify him!”—that was the decisive moment. God’s judgement was coming—in the near future from Paul’s perspective and nearly two-thousand years ago from ours—just as it came in the days of Isaiah. The nation was judged, everything destroyed, and the people exiled. But God wasn’t finished. Most were lost, but a *remnant* survived and from them the people was reborn. And that’s what Paul sees

happening again. The nation is finished, but a remnant will be saved.

But why? Why is God working *this* way? Why not bring the whole nation of Israel to faith in Jesus? Why allow judgement and destruction just so that he can save a remnant? These are the questions Paul is now going to answer.

Paul draws on some ideas that had been around a long time. One of them is the theme of the older brother. Jesus drew on it, too. Think back to his parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus told a story about a young man who demanded his inheritance from his father and then squandered it on loose living in a far-off country. Down and out, he returned home, hoping his father might take him back a hired hand. He was shocked when his father ran out to greet him, hugged and kissed him, welcomed him home, and threw a party for him. His son who was lost was found and he couldn’t have been happier. But the point of the story wasn’t just the prodigal son being forgiven by his father. At the end of the story, Jesus reminded his listeners about the older brother—the one who worked loyally and faithfully for his father. When he saw his brother welcomed home, he was resentful and filled with bitterness and jealousy. There’s resolution between the younger brother and his father, but Jesus ends the story with the older brother sulking outside the party. Jesus invited his audience to ponder where they fit in that story.

The theme of the older and younger brother is one that Jews new from their own story. Cain was jealous of Abel because God accepted his offerings. Ishmael was jealous of Isaac, because he was the miraculous son God had promised to Abraham. Esau was furious with Jacob for stealing his inheritance and his blessing—furious to the point of plotting to murder him. And think of Joseph. His ten older brothers were jealous of him. At first they conspired to kill him, but eventually settled on selling him to slavers.

In every case, God vindicated the younger brother and gave him a prominent place in the story of redemption, but the jealousy and bitterness are never fully resolved. Abel is still dead. Ishmael is forced to find a life for himself in the wilderness. Esau and Jacob are never fully reunited. Even with Joseph’s brothers, after we think there’s been full reconciliation, we find that they fear what Joseph might do to them after their father dies.

Paul now picks up this theme that runs through Israel’s own story and applies it to this question about the place of his own people in it. The nation of Israel is now the older brother. The Gentile believers in Jesus, along with the handful of Jews who have also believed, are the younger brother. As in all the stories, the older brother is bound to become jealous, but what Paul sees is that in this case, that jealousy will result in a remnant of Jews coming to faith in Jesus. This is what God is up to. Look now at Romans 11:7-8.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.”

The first thing Paul does here is to stress this distinction that he set up in Chapter 9: there’s Israel and there’s *Israel*. There’s more to being the “seed” of Abraham than biological descent. Israel was seeking God’s vindication, but it’s the Gentiles who have wound up finding it. As he wrote in 9:30-31, “[The] Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.” But there are a few—people like the disciples, like those Jews gathered to

hear Peter on Pentecost, like Paul—a few heard and believed. They're the ones Paul describes as "the elect" here. But the rest of the nation was hardened.

Now, we need to remember what Paul's already said about God hardening hearts. If we forget, it's very easy for discussion of this passage to get lost in the weeds. Back in Chapter 9, Paul introduced this idea of the older serving the younger when he quoted Malachi, "Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated." It was just a few verses later that he wrote of God hardening Pharaoh's heart so that his own name and power would be proclaimed amongst the nations. The story about Pharaoh and his hardened heart is important for context. There's a tendency to think of this hardening of the Jewish nation as a temporary hardening, which will someday be reversed, but that's not the idea that Paul is drawing on. It's not the idea of hardening that we see in the Old Testament. No, the tradition that Paul's drawing on is something we see repeatedly in the Old Testament. God delays judgement so that one of two things will happen: repentance or hardening. Some will repent and turn back to God. Others will continue in their obstinate rebellion so that when God's judgement does finally come, everyone will see that his judgement is just. Hardening is the opposite of repentance. Hardening is never temporary. Hardening is always a continued rebellion or rejection of God that brings just judgement. This is what happened to Pharaoh when God unleashed judgement on Egypt. Israel was delivered and Egypt laid low. Paul sees something similar happening here. God has delayed his judgement. The heart of the people of Israel is hardened, but the delay is giving an opportunity for Gentiles—and even individual Jews, like Paul—an opportunity to acknowledge that the risen Jesus is Israel's Messiah and to submit to him in what Paul earlier called "the obedience of faith". It's

important to remember Paul's distinction: The nation or the people with its hardened heart is hopelessly bound for judgement—just as in Isaiah's day—but God has not abandoned his promises. A remnant will be saved.

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 29:4 just to stress the hopeless state of the nation. These words were part of the covenant renewal that Moses led the people in right before they entered the promised land. These were the children—the *remnant*—who were born out of the rebellious generation condemned to die in the desert. The parents of these people were the ones who had seen God's judgement fall on Egypt, who had walked through the Red Sea, who had been there at Mt. Sinai when the law was given, and who had eaten manna in the wilderness. But they had eyes that could not see and ears that would not hear. Their hearts were hardened against the Lord and so they were barred from inheriting the promises given to Israel. They were biological children of Abraham, but they were not his true "seed"—as Paul would say. They were cut down, but in their children, the Lord saved a remnant. Just so again in Paul's day: the nation is lost, but Paul sees individuals—hopefully many of them—stepping out of the march to destruction and bowing before Jesus in faith.

In the second quote, in verses 9-10, Paul points once again to Israel's problem. He's quoting Psalm 69:22-23.

**And David says,
"Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;
let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and bend their backs forever."**

David also writes about eyes that would not see and that lead the people into a hopeless situation. But Paul quotes from the Psalm to highlight the core problem: "their table [has] become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block...for them". Paul develops this idea more in Galatians, but he points Jewish table fellowship, the system of dietary laws and of ritual purity that excluded Gentiles. The Jews saw this system as an integral part of who they were, especially as it set them apart from the Gentiles as the covenant people. Paul's point is that these "works of the law" associated with Israel's exclusivist mindset, have become the very thing causing Israel to stumble into judgement. Jesus was rejected, in large part because he broke these rules and welcomed Gentiles and sinners and as long as Israel refused to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, there would be no escape from judgement.

This is what has happened, but what was God's purpose in it? Look at verses 11 and 12:

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

Did God set Israel up just so he could see her stumble and fall? By no means! When he quoted Psalm 69, Paul brought in this language about stumbling and now he brings that together with the theme of jealousy that we talked about earlier. Paul gives us a picture of Israel stumbling over a stone in her path and he writes that through her "trespass" something glorious has happened. He plays with words a little bit. Trespass is the breaking of God's law, but it also has the sense of putting your foot down in the wrong place and losing your

footing. It's necessary. Think of Joseph—and I have to think Paul had him in mind here—when he told his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive” (Genesis 50:20). God has used Israel's stumble in order to bring the nations into the people of God. This is just what Jesus had said would happen. If Israel should fail to acknowledge him, God was perfectly able to raise up children for Abraham from the stones.

And here's why it had to be this way. If Israel as a whole had embraced Jesus—and that would have posed all sorts of problems, because how could redemption work out without the Cross?—but that aside, if the nation had embraced Jesus as Messiah, it would have simply confirmed the wrong-headed, exclusivist agenda that most of the Jews had. It would have looked to the Gentiles as if God were affirming Israel's special status. Sure, Gentiles could be part of the covenant—if they wanted—but it would have been as second-class citizens. That isn't what God had promised to Abraham. All along, his plan was to bring salvation to the *world* through Abraham's family. He is not the God of Jews alone and he's not the God merely of that little bit of middle-eastern real estate. He is Creation's Lord—all of it—and he is sovereign over all.

But, Paul says, this stumble on Israel's part was—all along—aimed at more than bringing in the Gentiles. The second part of the plan was that seeing the Gentiles inheriting *their* promises, the Jews would become jealous. Paul understood this very well. He heard the message that the new community being built around Jesus was the long-awaited covenant renewal. He didn't believe it for a second, but he fumed anyway as Gentiles began to join this movement in greater and greater numbers, celebrating and sharing in the life of God, talking about

themselves as part of Abraham's family and part of the covenant people. Paul wrote back in 9:4-5 that these were *their* privileges. But now he and other zealous Jews watched as Gentiles enjoyed them. Even though they rejected Jesus, they were upset that Gentiles were that, in Jesus, what rightly belonged to Israel was now theirs. Paul says that this jealousy was a powerful motivator. Eventually the older brother would realise that it wasn't worth holding onto his bitterness if it meant missing the party.

And as odd a plan as it may seem, Paul stresses its glory. The tree—Israel—had to be cut down so that a single shoot—Jesus—could grow out of it, but the glorious thing is that the dead wood of the Gentiles can be grafted into Jesus and be given life—and so can the dead Jewish wood that was pruned off. In Jesus, all are children of Abraham, all are Israel.

And, again, Paul stresses that there is *one* means of salvation. The idea that Jews and Christians can follow different, but somehow parallel tracks to God simply won't do. Whether it's the popular “liberal” idea that all paths lead to God as long as you're sincere or the idea we sometimes see in the more extreme elements of Dispensationalism that God has a separate plan for Israel, we have to respond with a resounding “No!”. There is only one Saviour. When Gentiles come to faith in Jesus, they are coming into the covenant family and inherit the covenant promises and share in the covenant blessings. The other side of the coin is that the way for Jews to be saved is no different than it is for Gentiles—by God's grace, though faith in Jesus the Messiah, apart from the works of the law.

We'll end for now with verses 13-15. Paul applies this to his calling and ministry.

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

Remember that Paul understood his calling to be to proclaim the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles—to non-Jews. He wanted to see Gentiles come to know and to submit to Jesus in faith. But here he stresses that this is the answer to his prayers for his own people. As he went as a missionary to the Gentiles, he hoped to see his “flesh”—the ESV translates it as “fellow Jews”, but Paul's wording is much more intimate—he hoped to see his flesh provoked to jealousy so that they would see that in rejecting Jesus, they were rejecting and missing out on their own inheritance.

But underneath this all is something breath-taking. When Paul writes here about Israel's trespass and about Israel stumbling, he's looking back to Romans 5:20, where he wrote that the law came in alongside, so that the trespass might be filled out to its full extent” (Wright-KNT). Paul's point was that Adam's sin—humanity's sin—was playing out in the life of Israel. Now Paul shows us how this works. When he writes about Israel's failure bringing riches to the Gentiles, when he writes about Israel's rejection meaning reconciliation for the world, and when he writes of Israel's acceptance meaning life from the dead, Paul is lining up Israel's story with Jesus' story. It makes perfect sense when we consider that Jesus acted as Israel's representative. He was brought low so that the world would be lifted up. He was rejected so that the world would be reconciled. He was raised from the dead so that the whole world might live through him. Paul saw Jesus and in light of

him, Israel's sad story suddenly made sense.

This is why Paul looked at his flesh—his unbelieving fellow Jews—with such sadness and love and it's why he could look at their obstinate rejection of Jesus and still hope that some would be saved. In them he saw the rejected Messiah, and in Jesus' resurrection he saw reason to hope that they would be welcomed back again. Paul was full of concern for his own people, but he could go preach Jesus to the Gentiles, knowing that the nations coming to Jesus was God's appointed means of grafting Jews back into the tree.

Now, what does this mean for us? Is Paul's situation—a believing Jew who wanted his fellow Jews to know Jesus—is that even relevant to us? And when Paul writes about hardened hearts and coming judgement, he was looking forward to events that were a few years away at that time, but that are almost two thousand years in the past for us. What does this mean for us?

Brothers and Sisters, I don't see any reason to think that the principles Paul is writing about here don't still apply—that God's appointed means for saving Jews is for them to be drawn to Jesus by seeing Gentiles claiming—in Jesus—the inheritance promised to Israel. And so my application today is may be more theological than it is practical, but it is this: The Church—we as Christians—must see ourselves as Abraham's family and as the inheritors of Israel's promises. First, we need to see ourselves this way because it's what Scripture teaches. But, second, this is what Paul points to as God's means of drawing Jews to Jesus. If we long to see Jews come to Jesus as Paul longed for them to do, we need to take this idea seriously. And as I said last week, it runs contrary to much of the teaching we see in the Church today. More often than not, what we hear is a

sort of two-track plan of salvation. Liberals on the one hand saying that all paths lead to God, so the Jews can go their way and we can go out and we'll all get there in the end. And, on the other hand, the dominant modern theological trend in North American Evangelicalism preaches something not all that different—that the Church and Israel are two distinct groups with two distinct sets of promises and two distinct inheritances and bases its whole evangelistic outreach on principles that are the polar opposite of what Paul writes here in Romans. When we hear that sort of thing, our ears out to prick up. We ought to recognise that something isn't right. And we, ourselves, need to hold firm to the truth that Paul preaches here. It may not seem very relevant here. How many Jewish people do we even know? And, unlike Paul, we aren't even Jews ourselves. Brothers and Sisters, you and I are little players in God's great plan. Our parts may seem small, but we're called to be faithful in them nevertheless.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we're thankful for St. Paul's reminder that our life has come at the expense of the sacrifice of your Son, Jesus, but not only that, as Gentiles, as people who were once not your people, we have become your people through the rebellion and the casting away of those who are your people. Give us a burden for their restoration to you, we ask. And teach us to live as your people in such a way that it will draw them to faith in Jesus. We ask this through him. Amen.