

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS  
*Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch*  
*Lesson 15 - Romans 11:5-24*

**Romans 11:5-10**

In verses 5 and 6, Paul says that the remnant continues in his own time. The remnant he refers to is the community of those who accept the gift of faith. The righteousness they receive is pure gift. It is received through grace and not because of any works of the law. In verse 6, Paul repeats what he has said numerous times in his letter: salvation is a gift. If salvation could be earned then it would be something which is due. But as a gift, salvation is rooted in the mercy and generosity of God.

Verse 7 opens with the question, "What then?" We could paraphrase this in relation to verse 6 as, "Since righteousness is a gift, what can we say about Israel?" And the answer is, "All we can say about Israel is that it failed to attain righteousness because it tried to do so by means of the law. Israel did not recognize the gift which was being offered through faith in Christ." The elect, meaning Gentile and Jewish Christians, attained righteousness, but unbelieving Israel was hardened.

In verse 8, Paul returns to quoting the Hebrew Scriptures. He combines Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10 to show that Israel's hardness of heart was foretold. Since, in the Hebrew mentality, God causes everything, there must also be a reason why God caused this "sluggish spirit" to come over Israel. Paul will soon explain this.

Verses 9 and 10 are an adapted use of Psalm 69:22-23. Paul again changes some of the words to fit his purpose. Verse 22 of the psalm is translated as, "Let their table be a trap for them, a snare for their allies." But Paul inserts the image of the "stumbling block" and rather than making reference to the "allies", he draws the attention back to "them," the Jews. The reference to the "table" is a symbol of feasting and security. But Israel's security, the law, actually becomes a snare for them because they will not free themselves from its grasp. In verse 10 of the letter, Paul uses the image of "backs forever bent" as a sign of the blindness of unbelief. Israel stumbles because of the eyes which are darkened. They have stumbled over the stone who is Jesus.

The quotations Paul uses in the previous three verses imply that God is the one who caused the Jewish people to be hardened. This raises a question we have touched on before, "How do we reconcile God's power and human free will?" This is a paradox which our human minds cannot comprehend.

Even if we move away from the strict Jewish mentality, we are still faced with the question. In our Christian tradition we believe that God is the one who first motivates us to acknowledge him. This is the effect of the gift of the Spirit. And yet, we also hold that we are free, that God does not force us to love him. If love is coerced in any way, it ceases to be love. This is one of the marvels of our relationship with God. He who is all-powerful is filled with joy when we freely turn to him and say, "I love you."

#### **Romans 11:11-16**

Paul asks questions in verse 11 which are very similar to the questions in 11:1, "Has God rejected his people?" and "Have they stumbled so as to fall?" Paul's response is an emphatic "No!" He cannot conceive of God's rejecting his people forever. This is all part of God's plan. In the second half of verse 11, Paul gives a brief summary answer to the overriding question, "Why did the Jews not accept Jesus as Lord?" The answer is that God planned it this way so that the Church would preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:45-48). Once the Gentiles were brought into the Church, the Jews would become jealous of the righteousness they received. This jealousy would then lead the Jews to desire the same righteousness, and so they too would come to the faith.

Paul's reasoning may not be convincing to us, but let us try to put ourselves in his place and deal with the facts as Paul sees them. It is a fact that the Gentiles accepted the faith and the Jews did not, except for the remnant. To Paul's mind, it is a fact that God causes everything and so the Jews' rejection of the faith must be part of God's intent. It is a fact that God will not reject his people forever. This is reality as Paul sees it and so he comes up with an explanation which takes all these points into consideration.

Verse 12 betrays a bit of Pauline logic which we must "take on faith." Paul says that if the unbelief of Israel resulted in such blessings for the rest of the world, then the blessings will even be greater when Israel accepts the faith. Paul's belief in this future multitude of blessing rests on two convictions. The first is that Paul's vision of the kingdom of God involves the end of all alienation. Jews and Gentiles will no longer be separated. This may seem like common sense to us, but to the Jews of Paul's time this is radical thinking. The thinking among many of the Jews, at the time of Paul, was that God had created the Gentiles for one purpose - to fuel the fires of hell! Can you imagine trying to convince someone with this mentality that the Gentiles are loved by God? The second conviction is that God's love can overcome all obstacles. Unbelieving Israel may have a hardness of heart, but God will soften the heart with his mercy and love. This is Paul's firm conviction.

Paul has been speaking to the Jews from the beginning of chapter 9 up to this point. Now with verse 13, he addresses his remarks to the Gentiles. Paul reminds the Gentiles that he was set aside as the apostle to the Gentiles.

This designation was made at the time of his conversion (Acts 9:15, Galatians 2:7-10). Paul has given his whole life to God in service to the Gentiles, but in verse 14 he reveals another motive. He says that he glorifies his ministry "in order to make his own people jealous". Paul works hard among the Gentiles in order to bring them to faith. He also hopes that when his own Jewish people see the blessings of Christianity, they will want to share in these same blessings. He concludes verse 14 by saying that he wants to "save some of them," but in Paul's heart there is the desire that all of his people will one day come to accept Jesus as Lord.

The opening phrase in verse 15 can be understood in two different ways. The phrase "their rejection" can mean either "their rejection by God" or "their rejection of the gospel." The preferable interpretation is "their rejection of the gospel." Most commentators choose this form because it is more consistent with 11:1, in which Paul says that God has not rejected his people.

The end of verse 15 is also open to various interpretations. What does Paul mean when he says that Israel's acceptance will be "life from the dead"? Again, if we look for consistency in Paul's letter, we need to return to 6:1-4. In chapter 6, Paul speaks of baptism as our dying and rising with Christ. If the Jews accept the gift of faith and accept baptism, they will experience this same new life, life from the dead.

In verse 16, Paul introduces two images which he will expand in the following verses. He speaks of the "part of the dough" and of the "root". In Numbers 15:17-21, the Lord gives instructions through Moses that there should be a "donation to the Lord". The first loaf from the batch is dedicated to God. This offering of thanksgiving has the effect of making the whole batch of dough "holy". In Paul's mind, the faithful remnant of the Jews who accept the gift of faith are the "first offering" who make holy the rest of Israel.

At the end of verse 16, Paul makes reference to the "root", meaning the patriarchs. God had formed his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and this covenant was unconditional. Paul says that God will not go back on his word: he will always be the God of Israel. Paul is reflecting on the promise of God that salvation will come through the Jewish people. God promised that the Messiah would be of David's line. Although the nation as a whole was never faithful, there was always a remnant which remained loyal to God. Paul is saying that because of God's promise and because of the remnant, all nations will be blessed. Paul continues this analogy in the following verses.

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**Side Note: The Prophet Jeremiah**

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are called the three major prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. We looked at Isaiah in the last **Side Note**. Today we will look at Jeremiah, cir. 640-587 B.C.

Jeremiah lived during very tumultuous times in Jewish history. He was a reluctant prophet who was called at a young age (Jeremiah 1:6). His main theme was one of repentance. He told the people that if they did not reform their lives that Jerusalem would be destroyed. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. A small group of citizens were able to escape to Egypt. They took Jeremiah with them and there he died.

#### **Romans 11:17-24**

Verse 16 ended with the words, "and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy." This is the imagery which will be used throughout the verses in this present segment. Paul borrows the vision of Jeremiah 11:16 in which God calls Israel, "A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit." Israel is the olive tree whose roots go back to the time of the patriarchs. The Gentiles are the "wild olive branches" who have been grafted onto the tree. Paul now draws his insights.

At the beginning of verse 17, Paul says that "some of the branches were broken off." He is calling to mind that many of the Jews do not accept Jesus. To be separated from Jesus is to be separated from the flow of life which originated in the promise God made to Abraham. Some have been broken off but the remnant remains attached to the tree, now sharing in the righteousness which comes through faith in Jesus.

There was a custom among some of the people of the ancient near east, to plant a sapling and dedicate it to God. As the tree grew, all the new branches which came from that tree were considered holy, dedicated to God. Paul probably has this idea in mind as he speaks of the wild olive branches, the Gentiles, becoming the new branches of the consecrated tree. The tree, which is Israel, received numerous blessings, as Paul describes them in 9:4-5. The greatest blessing is the sharing of divine life which comes through the promised Messiah.

In verse 18, Paul returns to a word he uses several times in the early part of this letter, "boast." He warns the Gentiles that they should not look down on the Jews who remain in darkness. At the present time they may not accept the faith, but they are still part of God's Chosen People. The faith which the Gentiles share because of grace is a faith which comes forth from the roots of Judaism. God has been patiently working out his plan of salvation and that intimately involves the Jewish people. His plan is not yet complete, for it calls for the indwelling of all peoples in the kingdom of God.

Let us take a moment to look at an event which pertains to the topic of Judaism as the root of Christianity. In the second century A.D., there lived a man by the name of Marcion, cir. 100-160 A.D. He tried to eliminate the Hebrew Scriptures from Christianity. Marcion said that the God of the Jews was not the same as the God of Christians. His heresy spread rapidly through the Roman Empire.

This was a precarious time, for the canon of the bible (the list of books which make up the bible) had not yet been established. Marcion was declared a heretic. By this act the Church firmly established the belief that Christianity is the direct continuation of Judaism. The Hebrew Scriptures are preserved as a vital part of the revelation of God and his plan of redemption for all humanity.

In verses 19 and 20, Paul agrees that some of the branches were broken off, and this resulted in the Gentiles being grafted onto the tree. But he reminds the Gentiles that they are now part of the tree only through faith and faith is a gift, a grace (4:16). They have not worked so as to deserve this gift of righteousness. The proper response of one who realizes the abundance of God's free gift is "awe." This same attitude should be at the heart of our own spirituality. When, in humility, we become aware of the gratuity of God's love and mercy our response should be an overwhelming sense of joy and freedom. This sense of awe is reflected in the famous quotation from St. Augustine, "O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new!"

Verse 21 is a warning. Paul reminds the Gentiles that if the natural branches were cut off, then it is equally possible for the grafted branches to be separated. Paul does not say this in order to present God as capricious. He is rather reflecting the reality of the human condition. Grace is a gift, but God does not force his grace upon us. God leaves us free to accept or reject his offer of life. Even if at one time we have accepted his gift, there is still the possibility that we might use our free will to reject the gift.

Paul begins verse 22 by saying, "Note then the kindness and the severity of God." This same theme is reflected in the words of John 15:2: "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." Paul is warning the Gentiles again that God is looking for a response. The gift is freely given, but with the gift comes the call to conversion and the call to share the gift. The account in Matthew 25:31-46 is a clear statement of the issue Paul is presenting. If we say we love God, then this love must be manifested in the way we treat other people. To ignore the needs of the poor and disadvantaged is to ignore the sufferings of Christ. Our Christianity is not simply acceptance of propositional truths. Our Christianity is a commitment lived out in the daily activities of our lives. Faith in action is authentic faith.

In verse 23, Paul returns to his great hope. He says that God has the power to graft Israel back onto the tree, if only they will believe. This hope also indicates two other truths: First, Israel has not been totally and definitively rejected by God. In 11:1 and 11:11, Paul expresses his belief that the separation between God and Israel is not final; it is temporary. Second, there is still life within Israel. A branch can only be grafted onto a tree if the branch still has life. A dead branch will not be accepted onto the tree. In a similar way, Israel still has life as God's Chosen People. They may have been broken off for a period of time, but there is still hope that they will accept God's offer of righteousness through faith in Christ.

In verse 24, Paul again uses an "a fortiori" argument. ("a fortiori" means "how much more certain"). Paul says that if the wild olive branches, the Gentiles, can be grafted onto the tree, then how much more certain can it be that the natural branches, Israel, will be grafted onto the tree from which they came. In this verse, Paul is also expressing his hope for the coming of the fullness of the kingdom of God. Paul longs for the time when both Jews and Gentiles will fully share in the righteousness which comes through faith in Christ.

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