

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS, ROMANS 11

Pax Romana 26

- **Intro:** Tim Keller in his study on Romans 11 writes “Before we look in more detail at each verse, we need to recognize that this chapter is one of the most difficult in Scripture to understand.” John Piper, who has written an entire book on Romans 9 alone, preached 15 sermons on Romans 11! I am going to desperately try to give us an overview of this part of Paul’s letter. Maybe a few illustrations will help, for in the chapter Israel is an illustration. Israel’s salvation is an illustration not of merit, or privilege, but of grace.
- Years ago, when we only had our first son, Ben, and he was only about a year old, we moved to IA. In the backyard of our home stood a dead **red maple** trunk about 7 feet tall and 4 inches in diameter. I finished the job by cutting it down to a stump just a few inches off the ground. The next Spring, 5-6 shoots began to grow out of the stump. I snipped them all off with a pruner, intending to eventually remove the stump as well. But at the last minute, I left one shoot just to see what would happen. It grew. It grew rapidly, so I left it alone. By the time we moved ten years later there was a towering red maple whose trunk had completely engulfed the stump. You would never have know there had ever been a dead tree right there.
- This is a picture of Israel in Romans 11. In fact Paul uses the image of an **olive tree** instead of a red maple, I think because maples didn’t grow in Israel, or it could be because Paul really like olives, or maybe because as everyone in the Mediterranean

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knows, olive trees, while not towering like the Red Wood, live long lives like the Red Wood,



even thousands of years! You can cut them down, uproot them, even burn them and they can live on and



on. Heres a few pictures of some currently over 500 years old. [**picts**] It's a picture of the fact that...

- **1. God always keeps all of his own!**
- **A.** Israel is the example here. She is God's olive tree. Lots of things have happened to her. God has hardened her, pruned her, exiled her, but he will not let her die. Paul has been explaining in chapters 9-11 how he can preach that nothing can separate believers from God's love (Rom.8:38-39), how God foreknows, predestines, calls, saves and brings to heaven everyone he wants on purpose which he determined before time began (Rom8:29-30). God does not lose his own, ever. But Paul also addresses how it looks for all the world like that didn't happen with Israel, who is consistently called God's chosen all through the Old Testament, and consistently promised salvation. His answer comes in parts:
 - 1) God is saving some of Israel! He Paul (v2) is an Israelite and God has saved him! In fact all of the first Christians were Jews to begin with, so God is saving some individuals out of Israel. But as he pointed out earlier, the true Israel is bigger than ethnic Israel.

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- *"It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children." Romans 9:6, 7, NIV.*
- 2) Next Paul reminds us that God has always kept a part of ethnic Israel, the nation, alive. God has always hung on to a remnant of his chosen family all through history. With Abraham, it was Isaac, not Ishmael God kept. With Isaac it was Jacob not Esau God kept. With Jacob it was Judah & Benjamin, not the other ten tribes. Judah was captured and carried off to Babylon, but a remnant came back to the Promised Land later. With Judah it was David's line. But Paul's main example of this remnant is the prophet Elijah's hairy story! (v2-5) Let me recap...
- In 1Kings 18-19 the wicked queen Jezebel and 450 of her pagan prophets square off at a contest with God's one prophet, Elijah on Mount Carmel. They both build altars and agree that the God who answers by fire from heaven is the true God and the other team will knuckle under, say uncle, and serve that God. The Israelites are the gaping audience. Team Baal starts. For a whole day they chant, they cry, they cut their skin open with swords and stab each other with spears trying to get fire from heaven, from Baal, the so called "god of the storm". Nothing. Elijah, with a sort of chuckle suggests that Baal is napping, or on vacation. True

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story! Elijah douses his altar with water three times to make it even harder to light, prays, and whomp, lightning literally disintegrates everything, stones, and water –everything gone. Vapor. The people turn on the evil prophets and kill them. Jezzy runs for the palace by swears like Liam Niesen, “I’ll find you Elijah, and I will kill you”. Elijah gets depressed hides in the desert and cries to God that his Israel Nation experiment is a failure ‘cause there’s no one left who believes except him. That’s when v4 happens:

- “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.” Romans 11:4-6, NIV.
- Because God is full of grace, God always keeps his fire going. God will always have his church. God will never not have believing children. Not because inevitably some good and decent people will turn up and decide for Christ, but because God will inevitably grant grace to some people so that they will believe in him. Because God is sure to grant grace, God’s people are sure to survive! We call that perseverance of the saints. Saints persevere because God preserves them.
 - v5 reads literally “a remnant elected according to grace.”

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- “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened,” Romans 11:7, NIV.
- **B.** Now God’s preservation is a message of hope and assurance in a world full of despair and discouragement. You get yourself in a sticky situation that frankly makes it look like you don’t follow God at all! And you start to think, maybe I’m not God’s. Maybe God isn’t even real. Maybe I should drop all this following-Jesus stuff because I can’t hack it. Or your child grows up and chooses a distinctly immoral path or apathetic path, or merely a continuously sorrowful existence, and you hurt over it, and maybe even weep over it.
 - But God’s preservation of his own tells us that all this that we are in is not the end. Even we ourselves cannot ruin his salvation plan. All things must work together for the salvation of everyone God calls to himself. When all hope is gone, hope in grace! Do not give up. God cannot be beat!
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- **C.** Secondly, God’s preservation of his family is also a warning against pride and arrogance. God picked Abraham's family for no reason (Dt.7). But Abraham’s family started feeling entitled. So God pruned them back, a lot! He left one little shoot on the stump, so to speak, and went off to plant new trees across the street (gentiles). The new trees didn’t ask to be planted. God didn’t wait for them to ask. How could they, they did not exist. You might say they were “dead in sin”, but God made them alive

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through the life giving resurrection power of Christ. But then, even those trees, can begin to forget grace. So Paul reminds them...

- "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be *conceited*: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved..." Romans 11:25, 26, NIV.
- ["All Israel" could be 1) all the parts of Israel, Gentile parts, and Jewish parts, or 2) Israel as a future majority that becomes Christian.]
- What does this all mean? It's all grace. Grace for Gentiles Grace for Israel. So if you are one who knows the joy of being forgiven of sin, and headed for heaven, whatever you do, don't start thinking it's because you are something special, or because you at least were smart enough to take God up on the faith thing. No, see, it's either you, or it's grace, but not both. God does not give grace to a believe because he knows you are going to believe. No, if you are going to believe it is because God determined to give you grace.
 - So Paul tells the gentile Christians in Rome not to look down on the Jews rejecting Jesus, not to be conceited. Shoots only live because of the root. The root is God alone. He can bring that dead red maple back to life to.
 - "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

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branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.” Romans 11:17, 18, NIV.

- And here in is the challenge for us. Did you know that the tendency for new Christians is that after two years they have no non-christian friends any longer. And what about those of us you have been believers our whole lives? There is perhaps a variety of reasons behind this, but certainly one is that we all tend to start disliking people who think, or live in ways we dislike, or disagree with. We tend to be less than merciful with folks who, in our view, make bad choices and are now lying in the bed they made. But that is not the way God is. God actually elects, chooses sinners, and brings them home with him! You and I in his family are not better raw material than anybody else and if we start thinking so, God may have to let us harden, or be exiled, or suffer until we too come to our senses.

- **Conclusion:** God does not lose his own, ever. So be hopeful, but not conceited! If you walk out of the church under the portico you will see two bright green bushes on either side of the walk, next to the support columns. [picts] This spring they were 2-3 feet high and completely dead wood with just a sprout or two along the ground. It seemed silly to have to nicely manicures dead bushes in the front of church so I cut them down to the ground. Yet, when you leave you will see two very alive,

lime-bright bushes shining in the sun. Let them be a reminder of the



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olive tree of Israel.

- Sometimes our own sin kills parts of us and we are dead-ened.
- Sometimes the sin of the world and others saps our life too.
- Sometimes God may cut us back so as to remind us that life comes not from the branches but from the root. But be assured, because of the payment of Jesus' blood, any tree that belongs to God, is always preserved to the end.
- I at least find it interesting that Isaiah's 11th chapter bears a connection to the 11th chapter of Romans.
 - "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him--the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—... In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people... He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth." Isaiah 11:1-2, 10-12, NIV.
- We know that root to be our Lord Jesus, the resurrected one who could not stay dead in the earth, and who gives life to everyone who believes.