

Romans 11:13-24

Introduction

Although the NJT continued to challenge Paul with his objections, Paul clearly showed that the gospel message has gone out and Israel has had the opportunity to heed (obey) its message. But Israel was a contrary people, and God had placed a stumbling block in their path that blinded their eyes from being able to see God's faithfulness in the Christ event. One of the difficulties of Romans and this section is how we are to understand the balance between the free will of humanity and the sovereign will of God. At times scripture ascribes responsibility to humanity and at other times, through images of stumbling stone and hardening, places responsibility upon God. As far as Romans is concerned, it needs to be remembered that the discussion is not about individuals but about Israel and Gentiles as groups of people. However, knowing that does not always bring a great deal of satisfaction when we see God hardening and throwing rocks in people's path and at other times opening eyes of people. One reason we have a problem with this is the way moderns look at life. As Moderns we think we have to have all the answers to our questions before we can believe something. Rabbis, of which Paul was one, were comfortable with two or more contrasting or even conflicting ideas or possibilities. They had little or no desire to find one answer but believed there was value in conceptual dilemmas and they enjoyed the journey of the discussion. Instead of being frustrated with how God is often portrayed we need to remember we are the clay and He is the potter. His ways are far beyond ours. We should marvel at the fact that God's ways are often beyond our ability to grasp. After all, we should not want a God who only works in the world in ways that satisfy our finite minds and in ways that square with our finite abilities of understanding. God hardens, throws rocks onto the track, and opens eyes all for the purpose of reconciling the world to Himself.

God's hardening or tripping up of Israel in no way means God had abandoned Israel. Both Paul and a remnant are proof God had not rejected Israel permanently. Although most in Israel had stumbled, they had not stumbled so as to permanently fall. Their stumbling blessed the world, as seen in Gentiles being made covenant partners. But that is not the end of the story for Israel. Paul believed Israel's jealousy of God's work among Gentiles would eventually bring about a "fullness" of Israel in the future. Most of Israel may have rejected Jesus up to this point, but Paul expected more (or all) of Israel to embrace Jesus at some point in the future. As we move farther into Romans, it will become clearer that this whole discussion is instruction to Gentile Christians about their relationship with Jews, even those who had up to that point rejected Jesus. The Gentiles were to live lives of reconciliation toward all people, including Jews who had rejected Jesus.

God's Ongoing Work With Israel: 11:13-16

Gentiles were probably the majority group in the church in Rome. Paul focuses his comments specifically on Gentile believers here. That Paul refers to Israel in the third person is another indication the primary targeted audience is Gentile. Gentiles have been hearing the diatribe between Paul and the NJT for the purpose of understanding both their place and Israel's place in God's eschatological purposes.

This in no way means that Paul did not want Jews to hear this dialogue and learn more deeply what God had been and was doing with Israel and with Gentiles.

God had called Paul to minister to Gentiles (Acts 9:5; Rom. 15:16-18; Gal. 1:16; 2:9; Eph. 3:8). That certainly did not exclude him from preaching to Jews as seen in his going first to the synagogues in Acts. Paul's ministry to Gentiles stirred up a great deal of controversy as he preached a gospel that did not require Gentiles to embrace Jewish identity markers for covenant membership. His ministry to Gentiles was not under a cloak of darkness but was in the sight of all to see ["glorify (or magnify) my ministry"].

By openly ministering to Gentiles Paul expected Jews who had rejected Jesus to become jealous of what God was doing among the Gentiles so they might in turn be drawn to Jesus. The conversion of the household of Cornelius (Acts 10-11) was one of those experiences where Jews saw God working within Gentiles as they had seen God's power working among Jews in Acts 2. Those who experienced the giving of the Spirit to Cornelius' household knew that any attempt to exclude Gentiles from God's blessings through Christ would be hindering the work of God (Acts 11:17).

The phrase "save some of them" raises the question of how many of Israel will eventually come to trust in Jesus. The common view has been that this phrase defines the concepts of "fullness" and "all Israel" as referring to a larger number in Israel but not to literally every Israelite. Alternately this phrase can also be Paul's realization that there was a limit on how many Israelites he could reach through his particular ministry. Other Jews would be saved by God through other preachers. This is not a discussion that has a definite answer to which everyone can agree. Most all scholars agree that Paul expected that at least many Jews would come to trust in Jesus after the "full number of the Gentiles has come in" (11:25).

Israel's rejection followed by acceptance in 11:15 is a restatement of 11:12's stumbling/defeat followed by Israel's fullness. The stumbling of Israel in verse 12 brought riches for Gentiles, and the rejection of Israel in verse 15 brought reconciliation for the world. God's temporary rejection of many in Israel (as seen in their stumbling caused by God throwing a rock onto the track) played a role in God's reconciliation of the world.

The "acceptance" of 11: 15 is not as passive of a concept as modern readers might conclude, but is an expression of active divine initiative. God's acceptance of Israel will mean new life in this age and in the age to come ("life from the dead" or resurrection). There appears to be an understanding here that the future eschatological hope for the world is connected to (not made possible by) this future acceptance of Israel.

The "dough" image comes from Numbers 15:17-21. Israel was required to offer a portion of the dough made from the first of the harvest. By offering the first dough to God, dough that would be made from the harvest of later grain would also be considered consecrated to God or holy.

There is debate as to the identification of the "first fruits" and "part" of the dough as well as the identification of the "root." Suggestions for the "first fruits" or "part" include Abraham, the patriarchs, remnant Jews (for some it includes early Gentile converts) in Paul's day, and Messiah. Suggestions for "root" include Abraham, the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), Messiah, and God. Regardless as to the identification of "part of dough" or "root," the intent of Paul's application is not as

debated. Israel's connection to the "part" and "root" make them holy or consecrated to God. Gentile Christians are not to consider Jews as disposable trash. God is not finished working to reconcile Israel to Himself.

Call For Humility Among Gentiles: 11:17-24

Gentiles who might have begun to think God had deserted Israel and embraced them instead were greatly mistaken. Some of Israel had been cut off from the tree but the Gentiles were not natural branches. They were "wild olive" shoots and were receiving the riches ("rich root") of the covenant blessings that God had promised to Israel. Whether the root is the patriarchs or Messiah, the blessings Gentiles were receiving came through Israel ("the root that supports you"). Gentiles are beneficiaries of promises made to Israel, not beneficiaries of promises made exclusively to them or independent of Israel.

Somewhat like the diatribe Paul had with the NJT, Gentiles are seen as boasting that God had pruned Israel so Gentiles could be grafted in (11:19). Paul agreed with part of the Gentile's perception. Some in Israel were pruned. Modern translations of verse 20a lead readers to draw a causal understanding of why some were pruned ("because of their unbelief"), placing responsibility on humanity. "Because" is an interpretation. The text literally reads, "in (the state of) unbelief," which may not be a causal statement. The same is true of the following statement "you stand in (your) faith (or faithfulness of God)." The "you" here is singular and refers to a Gentile believer who represents those who are arrogant against unbelieving Israelites. These phrases may be statements of status rather than statements of casual effect. Remember, God's hardening and stumbling stone were instrumental in Israel's state of unbelief. God chooses to do some things with those in faith and other things with those in unbelief all for the purpose of reconciling the world to Himself. Belief is not a cause for conceit. Gentile Christians were being instructed not to take up the prideful boast that had been seen in many Jews as a result of the gracious blessings of God. In the past, Israel had been arrogant toward Gentiles because of the blessings God had given them; now, Paul is instructing Gentile believers not to return the "favor."

Another part of this text that is difficult to deal with are the statements, "provided ("if") you continue in his kindness" (v. 22) and "If they do not persist in unbelief" (v. 23). Our First reaction may be to read these statements as a warning to the readers that *they* can change their circumstances by choosing to have ("continue in his kindness"), or not have, faith. Granted, there are other texts in scripture that seem to place responsibility in the laps of people for choices that effect whether or not they receive blessings from God. But does this view fit this context? God has been portrayed as the one who threw a stumbling stone in Israel's way (9:33); who hardened, gave a sluggish spirit, gave eyes that would not see, and gave ears that would not hear (11:7-8). These were God's actions that led to some being pruned and other being grafted in. It is more likely that 11:22-23 is still talking about what God could choose to do. God can harden or open eyes depending on what needs to be done in order to fulfill His promises. At times God's work involves hardening of some and at other times it involves opening eyes. Paul's point here is for Gentiles not to become proud about their current status. God can choose to change their status temporarily if it fits his overall purpose. The covenant status of Gentiles, as it was with Israel, is based on God's gracious and

merciful calling, not on their works or on their belief or unbelief. If having the promises did not prevent God from pruning some in Israel, Gentiles who had no such heritage regarding the promises should understand they are not immune from being pruned if it fits God's plans for reconciliation of His creation.

God's impartiality toward Jew and Gentile has been a major part of Paul's argument throughout Romans. Jews thought Gentiles could not receive the blessings apart from their identity markers and that God would deal more harshly with Gentiles than with Jews. Gentile Christians may have been thinking the pruning of many in Israel was not a fate that they needed to be concerned about. But again, God is impartial. If He can prune some in Israel, he can prune some from among Gentile Christians. The exhortation is for the Gentiles to remain in the kindness of God that they have come to experience. God also has the power to graft those in Israel who had rejected Messiah back into the tree. If God can graft in unnatural branches, "how much more" (for the "how much more" language see chapter 5) can He graft back in those who were originally a natural part of the tree. The only thing that keeps Israel from being grafted back in is their state of unbelief. God will be just as gracious in grafting Israel back in as He was in grafting unnatural Gentiles into the tree. God's severity and kindness operate equally for both Jew and Gentile.

Conclusion

Through the image of the lump of dough and root Paul demonstrated that even pruned Israel remained consecrated to God and what was currently happening with most of Israel was not the end of Israel's story. Gentile Christians should not arrogantly boast in their covenant status with God. They are unnatural branches that God graciously grafted into a tree whose root was based in God's promises to Israel. Just as God had pruned some in Israel, he could prune Gentiles. And just as God had grafted in unnatural Gentiles, he could certainly graft back in rejecting Israel (the natural branches). Gentiles should not take false security in their current status, which was based on God's sovereign choosing, not on anything they had done.

This and the following text, challenge our view of God. We, much like Job, often complain about what we think we see God doing or not doing in the world. Paul believed what was currently happening was God's way of reconciling the world to Himself. We don't have to fully understand it or like it, but we should marvel in his sovereign majesty and trust that he loves his creation beyond our capacity to understand.

Romans
11:13-24

1. What did Gentiles need to understand about their place in God's reconciliation of the world?
2. What did Gentiles need to understand about God's work with Israel (both those who accepted and those who rejected Jesus)?
3. How does Paul's explanation of what God is doing with Jews and Gentiles relate to how you should view yourself as a covenant partner with God?
4. What does this say about how you should view others whether they are currently experiencing covenant blessings or have, to this point, rejected Jesus?
5. Based on this text, where did Paul place the responsibility for trusting or not trusting in Jesus Messiah?
6. How do you square your response to question 6 with the previous section that spoke of God's hardening of some in Israel?
7. Describe what you have learned about God's work of reconciliation.