

THE CURE FOR SPIRITUAL PRIDE

SERIES: THE MYSTERY OF THE JEWS



Catalog No. 699
Romans 11:17-36
24th Message
Brian Morgan
October 2, 1988

In recent months, I have come to a new conclusion: one of the most difficult tasks in life is that of being a parent, especially with three children of the same sex—girls! I did not always have this opinion. Seven years ago, Emily and I took our two daughters out to breakfast when they were four and two. Since it was a one-to-one ratio between parent and child, we had a wonderful time filled with peace, harmony and tranquility. At that time, I thought, “Parenting is a wonderful occupation.” Then our third child arrived, and we ran out of laps.

As I look at each child, I know that she is a wonderful miracle. Yet when the three are together in one room—the older, the middle and the “Johnny-come-lately” with all of her energy—some interesting dynamics occur. To capture the atmosphere of a love-filled home with all three in harmony with their parents and with each other is but a small window in time! The most destructive force to that atmosphere is jealousy, that ever-present sense of comparing one child with the next. I have often thought how much easier it would be to put each of them in solitary confinement and raise them in isolation in order to eliminate this conflict. Of course, that is not God’s design. He intentionally puts families together under one roof in the midst of intimacy, conflict and jealousy.

As I read Romans 11:17-36, I was encouraged to find that in our spiritual family we also have three “children” or three groups of people. The family of God began with a remnant of believing Jews. As the first-born, they were reluctant to embrace the second-born, the Gentiles. Remember how much effort God spent convincing the apostles that the Gentiles, the unclean dogs, were to be equal heirs of the grace of life. God told them to welcome the Gentiles with open arms and give them equal status.

Now Paul is writing to the Gentile church in Rome about another problem, the third-born. As I said last time, when Paul considered the Mediterranean world, he saw Jews everywhere—in Rome, Gaul, and Spain. Yet he was facing a Gentile church that was inclined to say, “Yes, we have been grafted in, but God has cut off the remainder of the Jews. The church is now basically a Gentile organization.” A feeling of arrogance was developing toward the Jews.

In our text, we come to the first command of Romans 9 through 11. Behind this command is the entire weight of the doctrine Paul has already discussed. To the Gentile Christians, Paul says, “Do not be arrogant toward the branches (Jews).” Paul clearly saw that anti-Semitism was growing in the Gentile church.

In my reading this week, I tried to trace this theme through church history. When I came to the life of Martin Luther, I discovered that when the great reformer began his ministry in 1523 he protested against the cruel treatment of the Jews. He counseled kindness and charity as the way to convert them, saying: “If the apostles who were Jews had dealt with the heathen, as we heathen Christians deal with the Jews, no heathen would ever have been converted, and I myself, if I were a Jew, would rather become anything else than a Christian.” Later in his ministry, after he had studied with several rabbis, Luther became disgusted with their pride and obstinacy. He finally concluded that it was useless to dispute with them and impossible to convert them. He said they were a blind, hard, incorrigible race. He even went so far as to advise their expulsion from Christian lands, the prohibition of their books, and the burning of their synagogues.

It is interesting that 400 years later in that same nation, someone took those thoughts and filled them out in action. How ironic that after the Holocaust we could again quote Luther, “If I were a Jew, I would rather become anything else than a Christian.”

Romans 11 asks how we Christians can prevent spiritual pride from entering our lives. Paul gives us a three-part solution. The first part of the solution is revealed in verses 17 and 18.

I. KNOWING THE SOURCE OF LIFE 11:17-18

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the live tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.

The metaphor which the apostle uses to

explain the mystery of God’s kingdom is the olive tree. In his imagery, he combines two different trees—a cultivated one and a wild one. The wild tree normally produces poor fruit or no fruit at all. The cultivated one, because of its care, produces good fruit.

The cultivated tree represents Israel in its history. As the tree began to grow, it became weak and unproductive. Being the good gardener that he is, God pruned it severely and broke off branches to let in light and air. Then he grafted in the wild olive branch to produce more fruit.

It is interesting that Paul says later in the text that this procedure was contrary to the usual pruning practices. Normally, a gardener grafts a cultivated branch onto a wild olive tree so that the force of its vigorous life flows into the fruit. The Gentile, from the wild tree, is the grafted shoot. God does the reverse to produce a supernatural miracle. The goal is that both the stalk and the graft will be affected by the vigorous life of the root. Once the graft is fed by the olive stalk, it is able to bear fruit it was never able to produce before.

Paul says the danger involved is pride. As participants in all this rich life, we Gentiles compare ourselves with the Jews who were cast off and are filled with indignation toward them. John Murray writes in his commentary, “The person who is called upon to fill a place vacated by the exercise of discipline upon another is liable to gloat self-righteously over this advancement and look with disdain upon the fallen.” If you do not believe this is true, raise children!

I will never forget my own experience when I was fifteen and my sister was seventeen. My father gave her the gift of gifts—a 1957 T-Bird which he had kept for years. But the gift came with rules. My sister had to come home on time. The famous Beach Boys’ song became prophetic for her: “She had fun, fun, fun til her Daddy took her T-Bird away.” When the car was taken away from her, I got it! Although I did not have my license yet, I spent hours in the garage polishing and waxing that car. I gloated in my advancement and looked with disdain upon my sister. That car was the cause of my self-righteous pride.

Paul says the antidote to this pride is to remember the source of our life. We do not support the root; it supports us. Israel is the source of our life. We need to contemplate all

the riches we have in Christ: the Scriptures, the prophets, Jesus as the Messiah, the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the world-wide unity of our fellowship, the diverse spiritual gifts. We have love, joy, and a hope for the future. All of this is ours because we have been grafted into the root of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Every time God puts a Jew in your path, say to yourself, "Every blessing I have is because I have been adopted into his family."

Do not be arrogant toward the branches! The second part of Paul's solution to our pride is to contemplate the character of God. Look at verses 19 through 24.

II. CONTEMPLATING THE CHARACTER OF GOD 11:19-24

You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, and you stand only by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you.

Paul says, "You are still arrogant when you say you were grafted in because others were broken off." We must contemplate the character of God who shows no partiality. Membership in his community is based upon faith alone. This removes all grounds for boasting because we put our faith in the work of another—Jesus Christ. Second, Paul says this faith should produce fear. If we do not continue to cultivate it, we too will be cut off as the Jews were. God shows no partiality. Faith is the only basis for membership.

Paul also tells us to contemplate two attributes of God, his kindness and his severity, as they are acted out in history. Notice what he says in verses 22 through 24:

Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

Of course, God's kindness is reflected in the fact that he allows membership into this community based upon his mercy and his grace. What is the severity? This word comes from a root which means "to cut sharply." In geography, it was used of a steep slope, an unapproachable height, an inaccessible crag, or a height from which there was no escape. When

it was applied to a person's character, it meant "exact, strict" and referred to someone who was uncompromising in carrying out a resolve once he had made it. Thus, when God exercises his judgment, he does it with unrelenting severity and exactness.

These two attributes can be seen working together throughout Israel's history. First, in Deuteronomy 9 when God gave Israel the promised land in his kindness, he said, "Here is a good land filled with water and vineyards and cities you did not build. It is a rich land of olives and honey, iron and copper. Why are you getting it? It is a gift!" Then God says they were given the land not because of their righteousness but because of the wickedness of the Canaanites. He says, "Behold, my severity in judgment. I will cast out the Canaanites. Out of that judgment, you will receive the gift of kindness."

In the present, this is reversed. The Gentiles become the recipients of God's gift of kindness and are given the life of Christ, the new covenant, and the fulfillment of the promises to Israel. We were not heirs and had no right to any of this, yet God grafted us in because of his goodness. This life was not given to us because we were righteous. Rather, God's severity was revealed in the judging of his nation because they rejected the Messiah. Both God's kindness and severity were working simultaneously. Shortly after this letter was written, in A.D. 70, the axe of judgment took its final swing in wrath against Jerusalem through the Roman general Titus. Josephus writes in his history that no fewer than 115,880 bodies filled the streets of the city.

Paul also looks to the future. He says, "If you Gentiles do not continue in your faith, God will cut you off and will re-graft Israel." I think this may refer to what will happen during the tribulation. At that time, there will be great apostasy in the church, and all the nations will be judged as Egypt was judged originally. Then Israel shall be converted as a nation. This is my speculation although Paul does not state this explicitly.

A fellow-pastor, Ron Ritchie, just returned from vacation in Greece where he had the privilege of visiting the island of Patmos where the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation. The day they arrived happened to be the 800th anniversary of the monastery created in memory of St. John. When he and Ann Marie landed in the harbor, they were surrounded by destroyers and yachts. They saw the president of the conservative party, cardinals, bishops and many other important people. As they sat watching all of the pageantry, they opened up Revelation and started to read.

As you know, one of the seven letters in the beginning of that book was addressed to the church of Ephesus. God warned them that although they were pure in doctrine they had

lost their first love, and he said, "If you do not repent, I will remove the lampstand from you." When Ron went on to Ephesus, he saw that those words had come true in great severity. Ephesus is now nothing more than a museum of memories. The church's witness has been cut off in God's judgment. Ron returned with a heavy heart for our church, saying, "Peninsula Bible Church resembles Ephesus more than any of the other six churches. We can glory in our correct teaching, but where is our first love and our heart for Jesus Christ?" His prayer is that instead of becoming a museum of memories in the second generation we will continue with our first love.

This is Paul's point. We Gentiles cannot be arrogant. Rather we are to behold the kindness and the severity of the Lord. God's intention is still to re-graft his people into the branch.

If you are arrogant, remember you are not the source of life. Israel is. Second, contemplate the holy character of God. The third part of the solution is to understand the mystery of Israel's salvation. Look at verse 25 and following.

III. UNDERSTANDING ISRAEL'S SALVATION 11:25-32

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus [in this manner] all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob."

And this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins."

From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Now the apostle Paul opens up the mystery of salvation and explains how it works through the history of the nation of Israel. He says, "If you are ignorant of this mystery, you will be arrogant." Because Romans 9 to 11 is so misunderstood and often ignored in the church, anti-Semitism has continued for twenty centuries.

Lest we be wise in our own eyes, Paul tells us that only a partial hardening has occurred to Israel at the present time, not a total hardening. Second, he says this hardening is temporary, not permanent. It will last until the fulness of the Gentiles come into salvation. If we understand this, we cannot be arrogant, for

their hardening is for our benefit.

If any of you enjoys gardening, you know that the way to keep bushes healthy is to constantly prune them. Once I trimmed the bushes along our house with electric hedgetrimmers. It was so easy and took only twenty minutes! But my friend who helped me plant them told me not to do this. He said, "You will end up with large branches in the middle and little new growth on the stems. You need to reach inside the bush and pull out whole branches to let light and air in. This will give you more room for new shoots of growth."

The apostle tells us that the partial hardening of the Jews has created light and air so that we Gentiles could be grafted in. It was for our benefit! But he says, "This hardening is temporary. They still have a future."

He continues in verse 26 saying, "In this manner all Israel will be saved." The meaning of the phrase "all Israel" has been debated among scholars. I think the thrust of our text is strong. The apostle even in his own day was pointing to the present conversion of the Jews. Later in the text, he says, "That they may *now* be shown mercy." The gospel began with the Jews, but they were hardened. It then went to the Gentile nations. But the Jews dispersed among the nations watch this conversion and are made jealous. Many have been converted by this jealousy throughout history. The manner in which they are saved is by mercy just like everyone else. They have no claim on God. I think we can define "all Israel" as all Jews in all the nations throughout all of history. But that does not exhaust his meaning.

I think there is another implication in the text which is not stated explicitly. Paul implies that at the end of the age, during the tribulation, there will be another cutting off of the nations. The branches will again be pruned radically, and there will be a conversion of the nation Israel to Jesus Christ. Paul quotes Isaiah to show that this is why Jesus came in the first place—to save his people Israel.

What was the nation Israel like when Jesus came? From what was he redeeming them? The answer is found in asking specifically whose place Jesus took on the cross. Who was supposed to have died on that cross? Barabbas who was a Jewish zealot, an insurrectionist trying to overthrow the Roman government. Remember that is what the people wanted Jesus to be. Barabbas was representative of the Jewish nation at that point.

The nation had become idolatrous in the way they wanted to bring forth the kingdom. They were going to deify the sword. Remember even the disciples wanted to do this. Peter took up a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and cut off a slave's ear. He too should have died as an insurrectionist, but Jesus took his place.

Jesus came to Zion to bring a new covenant and a new way—the cross—to heal his people and to cleanse them from their sin. They had no claim on God. Saved by grace, they would be a people of love and a light to the nations again.

Having said that, what is Israel today, twenty centuries later? They are still a nation of zealots. I think historically we must consider this text as being yet unfulfilled even though we do have a remnant throughout history. The people as a nation are still unredeemed, for most are still zealots. It is my opinion that in the great tribulation they will look upon him whom they pierced and be converted. They will give up their zealotry, take up the cross, and die for Jesus. The covenant that Jesus made on the cross, once and for all, will be accepted by them on that day. Again, as I say, this is not the explicit statement of the text, but is there by implication. The thrust is the present day salvation of Israel through the jealousy of the Gentiles.

Paul says the fact that Israel's salvation is guaranteed is based not only on the prediction of Scripture in Isaiah but on the irrevocable choice of God. He says, "From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gift and the calling of God are irrevocable."

The word "irrevocable" is used in the Old Testament for the word "to repent, to change one's mind." We learn in the Old Testament that God may change his mind about certain things. At times, he has changed his mind regarding his wrath and has been turned from his wrath. At other times, he has changed his mind regarding his blessings. But Paul tells us that when it comes to his gracious choices that end in covenant he will never change his mind. His loyal-love endures forever. Once he has made his choice to make a covenant with the people, he will never change his mind. This is the certainty of Israel's salvation.

Paul goes on to talk about the similarities between Israel's salvation and that of the Gentiles. Look at verses 30 to 33:

For just as you once were disobedient to God but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.

When the history of salvation is completed for Israel and the Gentiles, the salvation process will be just the same. Paul says, "Just as you Gentiles—so also the Israelites. Just as you disobeyed God, now they are disobeying God. You were shown mercy, they might now

be shown mercy."

God has shut up all men in disobedience that he might have mercy on all. The way of salvation is the same.

At times, I have argued with Jews because some of them see two ways of salvation. They see one for the orthodox Jews who keep the Torah and one for the Gentiles who are saved by grace and mercy. Paul says this is not so. All are saved by mercy.

The point of our text is that this faithful remnant of Israel which has been chosen by grace was not chosen so that the rest would go to hell. It was chosen so that it might reach more and more people. This beautiful olive tree started with the remnant. Then the shoots were pruned, and the Gentiles were grafted in by grace. Finally, another graft of Jews will be added. When all three are there, the tree will be filled out in beauty as the grafts interlock and interrelate. God's salvation history sees one humanity saved with one way of salvation—Jews, Gentiles and Jews.

My father recently had open-heart surgery in which he had five arteries grafted back into his heart. My friend Dr. Arthur Halliday told me that those grafts are good for ten years. Since my father is 79, those grafts could be the key to his life. Will they hold? That is the thrust of our text. What God has joined together let no man separate. In God's family, there are three groups. Woe to us if we choose to live in isolation and cut the others off. God's family has three children—the older child, the middle and the Johnny-come-lately. We are to all live in harmony under the grace of God. It is my prayer that Martin Luther's words will not be repeated in our generation: "I myself, if I were a Jew, would rather become anything else than a Christian."

I would like to pay tribute to a dear friend of mine, Dick Woike, who attends our church. At the age of 37, he was challenged by a man to read through the Bible in one year. He took the challenge and repeated the practice for 46 years! When I was visiting with him this week, he shared with me a family secret that his mother told him when he was young. He has Jewish blood in his veins. Even though they were already living in America, because his father was German, this was a secret not to be revealed to anyone. In 1935, when Hitler was coming into power, Dick's mother asked him to sign an affidavit to sponsor a Jewish family to come to America. His family continued to do this until they had sponsored 21 Jews. As they arrived in New York, Dick's mother greeted each of them with hugs and New Testaments, and she welcomed them into their church. Over half of those Jews accepted Jesus Christ! This is how God wants his circle of love to be completed.

Paul was concerned about the anti-

Semitism among the Gentiles of his day. He wants to break the pride of the Gentile believers that causes us to see ourselves as superior to the Jews. He does this by telling us that the source of life is not us but Israel. Then he instructs us to contemplate the character of God, both in his kindness and in his severity, and to understand the mystery of Israel's salvation. We need to know that they still have a future through us. If we have taken part in the three-part solution to our pride, the correct response is revealed in the next verses.

IV. FALLING PROSTRATE BEFORE GOD IN HUMILITY 11:33-36

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Some scholars believe that Paul has taken various texts from Jewish literature to compose a hymn here. I think this is interesting because I believe singing is the mark of the renewal of God's people. If you have understood the argument of salvation history in Romans 9 to 11, there is nothing else to do but fall prostrate in humility and let your heart sing with praise for the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ. This is just what Paul does!

The first stanza speaks of the sense of inadequacy we encounter when we become ac-

quainted with God. When we consider his ways of wisdom and judgment, we must admit, "We are not in your league." Before, as Christians, we may have seen our salvation as personal and private; we may have become narrow and myopic, arrogant and proud. But in these chapters, Paul has taken us up the Swiss Alps of salvation theology to gather God's view for ourselves. While climbing to the top of the peak, he has shown us all the ridges, interconnected valleys and flowing streams that have been woven together to create salvation history for all of time. When we see the greatness and magnificence of God's plan and that we have the privilege to be a part of it all, we are left at the top of the peak standing in awe.

This happened to me when I travelled in Eastern Europe this summer. At one point, when we were teaching the Christians in a secret meeting, a young man shared with me the fifty-year history of their denomination. It began with one man who gave himself to New Covenant teaching. Before he died of cancer, he gave birth to a tiny remnant of believers who suffered for their faith. One of them spent 16 years in prison where he composed 10,000 hymns to Christ. Those songs became the hymnal for the congregation. When he was released, the movement spread, and now they have some 300,000 believers. As the young man shared this with me, I was awed that God would allow me to be a part of it. He took me across the globe to allow me to interrelate with them. This is echoed by Paul when he says, "O the depth of the riches of his wisdom and judgment!"

In the second chorus, Paul asks, "Who

knew the mind of the Lord? Or who was His counselor?" We sing with a whole heart that God needed no one help. He did it all without us. I marveled at the launching of the space shuttle this week. How many counselors and engineers did it take to correct the mistakes we made two years ago? Our God needed no one's help or counsel to bring about salvation history. He knew what he wanted to do and how to do it. He was completely adequate in himself.

In the final chorus, we sing, "Who gave an advance to Him, that it would be given back to him?" I do not think this is referring to material possessions. This thought is echoed in Job 35:7 and 41:3 which speak of man's righteousness:

If you are righteous, what do you give to Him?

Or what does He receive from your hand?...

Who has given to Me that I should repay Him?

Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine.

The point is, God is not in our debt. We can never produce a righteous life to offer to him so that he would owe us anything. He is the source of life, and from him are all things. He is also the sustainer of life, and he will be the end of life in every sphere.

The life we receive from God has nothing to do with our own righteousness. It is a gift. We are in his debt and owe him everything. Do you know what he appreciates the most in response? He wants us to sing his praises with thanksgiving! Amen.

Copyright 1988 All rights reserved.