

TUTORIAL
3.14

An Unfathomable Plan

Bible presenter Scot Keen concludes the discussion of God's faithfulness to Israel and to the Gentiles in this tutorial. He marvels along with the Apostle Paul about God's unfathomable wisdom and mercy in the face of our failure and sin.

Introduction

In this tutorial we move into the remainder of Paul's argument concerning God's faithfulness and his promises to Israel. This brings us to Romans 9:30-10:21 and then to chapter eleven for a look at the reason for Israel's rejection. Let's jump in. Paul has already shown us the justice of Israel's rejection. He said that physical descent does not guarantee one will inherit the promises of God. He explained that God is free in the exercise of His mercy and judgement. In essence Paul said first of all God is God and He can do what He wants, of course always consistent with His nature and character.

The reason for Israel's rejection

Now Paul will explain that God in fact had a reason to set Israel aside. Israel sought righteousness the wrong way. Look at Romans 9:30, "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith." The Gentiles were not looking for God's salvation. They were living their lives apart from God and were not even thinking about salvation and yet they found God's righteousness by faith when the Gospel Message went to them.

"But Israel pursuing a law of righteousness did not arrive at that law." Why? "Because they did not pursue it by faith but as though it were by works" (Romans 9:31). Israel did not get righteousness, Paul says, because they were trying to earn it by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone just as it is written, "Behold I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence and he who believes in him will not be disappointed."

Paul is using Isaiah chapters eight and twenty-eight to show that the Messiah would be a stumbling stone for some. He would also be salvation for others and those who trust in Him would not be disappointed. Their hopes and

expectations would be fulfilled when they trusted in Him. Israel had sought righteousness the wrong way. They sought it by works instead of by faith. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. When Jesus came and told the Jews that their self-righteousness was not good enough, they stumbled over that. Some were offended by His Message but there were others who believed in Him as Messiah, and as Paul says, they were not disappointed.

Paul says his heart's desire and his prayer to God for Israel is for their salvation (Romans 10:1). Paul says, "I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

Paul's prayer is for Israel's salvation but they are missing out because they are trying to gain righteousness by works when Christ is the final answer. Christ is the end of the law of righteousness to everyone who believes. They are zealous but are ignorant of God's righteousness that is provided through faith in Jesus. Notice that Paul's desire and his prayer is for Israel's salvation. This is bigger than personal, individual salvation. Paul's desire is that Israel would have everything that God promised them.

If you have been following along in previous modules you will know that God has been pointing towards the Messiah who would come and reign and bring in Israel's golden age. The Messiah would bring about their salvation. As Isaiah and other prophets foretold, Israel would have a period of great blessing where they would beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Paul longed for Israel to have their salvation. The salvation would begin first of all with individual Israelites trusting in Jesus as Messiah and would ultimately arrive when God conquered the nations and brought the Messiah to reign over all the earth.

In verses five onwards, Paul shows that Israel was seeking to do something when the work had already been done. They were zealous but ignorant and now they are trying to work when the work has been done. Notice that the righteousness of the law deals with what must be done. Moses writes that the man who practises the righteousness based on law shall live by their righteousness but the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows. "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

The righteousness of the law tells you to do something but the righteousness based on faith tells you that you don't have to do anything because the work has already been done. Faith does not say ascend into heaven and bring the saviour down. Faith believes he has already come. Faith does not say descend into the abyss and raise him up from the dead. Faith believes he has already resurrected. Paul says that the righteousness based on faith speaks of what has been done is within reach of all.

Paul goes on to say, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching." The message that Israel needed was right in front of them but they ignored it. All they had to do was to confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised Him from the dead and they would be saved. In fact, God is rich in mercy on Jews and Gentiles and so saves any who call on His name. Paul argues that Israel sought righteousness the wrong way and that is why God set them aside. They did not believe.

Israel tried to do work when the work had been done. As Paul said, "Being ignorant of the righteousness of God, they sought to establish their own righteousness." Then Paul goes on to say that Israel rejected her opportunity to be saved. Now verses fourteen to twenty-one is a large section that needs to be given more time, but for now I will simply say that Paul's basic argument is that Israel heard the Message but they refused to believe it. As He says, "All day long I have stretched out my hand to a disobedient and obstinate people" (Romans 10:21).

This is important because back in chapter nine the question was raised: Why does He still find fault who resists God's will? Paul was so emphasising God's sovereignty in chapter nine that someone could conclude that they are helpless under God's sovereign hand. Paul was emphasising God's sovereignty, that God has freedom to set Israel aside, but now he is showing in fact that God had a reason and should not be blamed. If anyone is to be blamed, it is Israel because God stretched out his hand to the disobedient people. We find that in the gospels as well as the book of Acts, and so Israel was set aside because of her unbelief.

The extent of Israel's rejection

Let's move on and talk about the extent of Israel's rejection. So far we have discussed the justice of Israel's rejection, that God is God and we are not. We know the reason for Israel's rejection, unbelief and rebellion, and now we'll see the extent of Israel's rejection in chapter eleven. Paul is going to show us first of all that the rejection of Israel is partial in number. Look with me Romans 11:1, "I say then, God has not rejected his people, has he? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin."

No one can conclude that God has rejected the Jews completely because Paul was a Jew and he had received God's mercy and so we have Paul as proof. Then Paul goes on to speak about a believing remnant as additional proof. "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have torn down your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life'" (Romans 11:2). Elijah felt like he was the only one. And what is the divine response to him? God says, "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." It appeared that Elijah was the only one but in reality God had preserved a remnant. Paul draws a similarity with the believing remnant even in his day. "In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:5-6). There was a remnant of believing Jews because of God's gracious choice.

"What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened" (Romans 11:7). God showed mercy on some and yet He hardened the rest. He quotes the Psalms and other passages as well, such as Deuteronomy. He says here, "Just as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day.' And David says, 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever.'"

Partial rejection

It looks like God has completely rejected Israel but the rejection was partial in number. It was not complete. There was a remnant, a group of believing Jews because of God's grace, but the rest of them were hardened. He quotes these passages to show that they have the spirit of stupor. They are blind and, as David says, their table became a snare. The things that were intended to be for their blessing became a snare to them.

This goes back to chapter nine where we saw their blessings, their promises, their covenants, their glory and their fathers. These were their blessings, their table, but they came to be a snare when they trusted in them as their salvation. They trusted in their Jewishness as that which made them right with God instead of seeing it as a privilege, as a portal which gave them access to the knowledge of God through the Hebrew Scripture. So Paul has shown us that that the rejection of Israel is partial in number. It is partial because Paul is proof and the believing remnant is also a proof.

Temporary rejection

Now Paul will show that the extent of Israel's rejection is only temporary. It is not forever. He will show that through Israel's fall the Gospel is released to

the Gentiles. Paul says, "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they?" (Romans 11:11). There are two different Greek words used here and one means to be tripped up and one means to fall beyond recovery. Paul in essence is saying Israel did not mess up so bad that there is no future and he adds, "May it never be!" But rather by their transgression, salvation has gone to the Gentiles to make them jealous.

Gospel for the Gentiles

When Israel rejected the Gospel it resulted in God turning to the Gentiles. Now something amazing emerges in the book of Acts. You see it in Acts chapters thirteen, eighteen and twenty-eight. In all three passages Paul is speaking to Jews who have rejected his message. Paul says, "Let it be known to you from now on we go to the Gentiles." Paul is revealing that the result of Israel's rejection of the Gospel is the platform and the transition by which the Gospel goes to the Gentiles. The Jews rejected it and so it goes to the Gentiles.

Paul says in verse twelve, "Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be?" He says their fall resulted in the Gospel going to Gentiles. Let's pause and have a brief grammatical conversation here. When Paul says *their* in verses twelve to fourteen, who is he referring to? He is talking about unbelieving Israelites and says their fall has resulted in the Gospel coming to the Gentiles. Then he talks about their fulfilment.

This language speaks of Paul's anticipation of a future restoration of Israel. He sees a future for them. Paul says Israel's rejection of the Gospel means riches for the world and the Gospel's arrival to the Gentiles. Nevertheless, he sees a future for national Israel. "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (Romans 11:15). Paul speaks about their rejection as synonymous with reconciliation for the world. It means that the message of reconciliation, the Gospel, came to the world because the Jews rejected the Gospel Message which in turn became the occasion of the Gospel coming to us Gentiles.

A plea for humility

Paul continues his argument in verse seventeen and onwards. He suggests the Gentiles ought to be humble. Israel's fall equals the Gospel to the Gentiles but the Gentiles need to be humble and realise that they are coming into this by grace. He says, "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 olive tree," (Romans 11:17). Paul says, "Do not be arrogant toward the branches."

As Gentiles we did accept the Gospel and so our tendency might be to look down our noses in pride at the Jews and somehow believe that we are better

than them. Paul says that we are like wild olive branches grafted in. We came into something that God was already doing in history. He says, "Do not be arrogant toward the branches." "Remember", he says, "that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you."

I take these verses that we as Gentiles were grafted as probably speaking about the Abrahamic Covenant and the promises of God that came there. As Gentiles we came into what God was already doing in salvation history. We were wild olive branches grafted in and we became partakers with Israel of these promises that God gave to Abraham. We are blessed with Abraham as we've already seen in Romans chapter four. We shouldn't be proud towards Jewish people because we came into something that God was already doing in history.

"You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in'" (Romans 11:19). In other words, the Gentiles might say Israel was set aside so that we Gentiles could be brought in. Paul says, that they are partly right. They were broken off because of their unbelief. Can you see that again? That gets back to the reason why God set Israel aside. They were broken off because of their unbelief. And because they rejected the Gospel, God turned towards us. But as that is something that God in his grace did, we should not look down our nose on Jewish people.

In fact Paul says that we should be humbled by God's grace coming to us. He goes on to say they were broken off because of their unbelief but you- the Gentiles- stand by faith. Here is why we should fear. If God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare us either. Paul, I believe, is talking at a bigger level than individual. If God set aside Jewish people because of their unbelief and he turned towards the Gentiles, Paul is saying that if Gentiles do not keep responding in faith, God will turn away from them as well. I don't think he is talking to individuals here. I think he is talking to the Gentiles as whole.

Then Paul says in verse twenty-two, "Behold then the kindness and the severity of God to those who fell." God was in fact severe. God's treatment towards the Jews was so severe that he set them aside and they have been that way now for almost two thousand years and counting. However, He was kind towards us Gentiles. If the Jews do not continue in their unbelief will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in.

Paul is presenting a plea for humility. If God set aside the natural branches then we need to be humble and realise God could bring the natural branches back in. He simply set them aside because of their unbelief. Now Paul turns to Israel's future salvation. He says, "I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery" (Romans 11:25). When Paul uses this language, it means he is about to pull back the curtains and let us see into God's plan. He is saying, "I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery so that you will not be

wise in your own estimation that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”

When he says *partial hardening*, he means partial in number, as obviously not all Jews have been hardened. Paul is proof, as is the believing remnant. It is also partial in duration. Notice that it is limited by time. He says wait until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in and then all Israel will be saved. Paul sees a future for Israel. They have been hardened temporarily but not indefinitely. It will only last until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. Even today the Gospel is going out to the Gentiles, but when God is ready He will turn His attention back to the Jews and all Israel will be saved.

We know all Israel will be saved because it is written, because of the fathers and because of God's desire to show mercy to all. Let's look at these as individual aspects, but first of all because it is written. “And so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, ‘The deliverer will come from Zion, he will remove ungodliness from Jacob’” (Romans 11:26). Then he quotes from Jeremiah thirty-one, “This is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” Paul sees a future fulfillment of Israel in the new covenant. At least, it is in the future from his vantage point.

Paul believed that Israel would find her salvation in the future when the Deliverer comes (alluding to Christ's return). He says, “From the standpoint of the gospel, they are enemies for your sake” (Romans 11:28). In other words, the Jews were enemies of the Gospel, but from the standpoint of election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. Paul goes back to the fact that God made promises to the patriarchs, and because of that, Israel can have confidence that their salvation will come in the future. All Israel will be saved because it is written and because of the fathers.

“The gifts and the callings of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). God had called Israel to be His people and they will indeed once again be His people. Paul says, “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, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all” (Romans 30-32). This is a complex statement, so I will take the time to elaborate on this.

Paul establishes a precedent and the precedent is that the Gentiles were disobedient but they were shown mercy because of Israel's rejection of the Gospel. Speaking about the Gentiles, he says, “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, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.” This is a fairly confusing

wording here but basically Paul is saying is that God has set a precedent that He shows mercy to disobedient ones. He showed mercy to the Gentiles because of Israel's disobedience, but Gentiles were also disobedient. Since God showed mercy to disobedient Gentiles, that gives Him grounds for showing mercy to disobedient Jews. He has put all people under disobedience so that He might show mercy to all. This is what I call God's benevolent sovereignty.

God in His amazing kindness and grace used Israel's rejection of the Gospel as an occasion to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. God used the Gentiles receiving the Gospel as a precedent to show mercy to disobedient people, therefore He will show mercy to disobedient Israel. God has done all of this because of His desire to show mercy to all.

An appropriate doxology

That brings us then to verses thirty-three and following where Paul says, "Oh, 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."

I like to call this an appropriate doxology. Who would have ever thought to use Jewish rejection as Gentile inclusion? Who would have ever thought to use Gentiles being saved to make Jews jealous and then on occasion to show mercy to them? No one thought of this. No one gave this idea to God. No one was His counsellor. Rather this demonstrates the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, and because of that from Him, through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

This concludes Romans chapter eleven but I want to bring us back to where we started. The question was raised back in chapter three: what advantage is there in being a Jew? Paul gave a brief answer and he moved on. In chapter eight Paul said that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. The natural question for a Jew to ask is, "If God broke his promises to the Jews, how do I know that he won't break his promise with me? If something can separate Israel from the love of God, how do I know that I won't be separated from the love of God?"

Remember Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, God has forgotten me" and Isaiah said, "A nursing mother might forget her children but God would never forget Israel." In Isaiah fifty-four we learned that the mountains may shake and the hills may be removed but God's loving kindness would not be taken from them. Then in Jeremiah thirty-one we found that God made a covenant to Israel, promising that they would not cease from being a nation before Him.

The climactic answer of Romans nine through eleven is God's Word has not failed. God will not let go of Israel and therefore God will not let go of you. God has not broken His promises to Israel. They have not been separated from the love of God and so neither will you ever be separated from the love of God. That is why Paul needed to deal with this topic on the heels of making the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God.



DISCUSSION POINTS

An Unfathomable Plan

1. What was the cause of Israel's rejection?
2. What does the righteousness of the law speak of?
3. What does the righteousness of faith speak of?
4. Who are presently the recipients of God's mercy?
5. According to 10:21, was Israel's rejection due to a lack of concern on God's part?
6. How do we know that the rejection of Israel is only partial?
7. What is meant by becoming a partaker of the rich root of the olive tree?
8. Using phrases from the text of Romans 11, list as many possible evidences that the rejection of Israel is only temporary.