

3 God's faithfulness to his people (Romans 11)

All letter long, Paul has been asserting the faithfulness of God. God never gave up on the nation he chose to be his people when he called Abraham. But God never gave up on the rest of the world either. God's choice is God's choice, so in the Messiah's leadership all nations are called to be God's people, as faith[fulness] to him sets the whole world right (Romans 9).

The Messiah was the goal of the Torah (10:1-4). Rather than relying on Torah-compliance to put us right, it's the Messiah who bridges the gap and puts us right with God. Now there is no difference between Jew and gentile: everyone who calls on his name will be saved (10:5-13). Everyone needs to hear so we can all call on him (10:14-21).

Any questions on Romans 9–10 before we proceed to Chapter 11?

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3.1 Israel as a nation today

How does the nation of Israel fit into the purposes of God now that the Messiah has come? That's a huge question today.

For 1800 years, Jews had no homeland. For 2500 years, they had no government of their own. They wandered among the nations, suffering rejection and hostility. Hitler used hatred of the Jews to weaponize support for his Nazi party. After World War II, the nations agreed Palestine should be divided and shared between Palestinians and Jews. Some Jews saw their return as fulfilling the promises God had given the prophets (e.g. Ezekiel 37).

Some Christians saw it that way too, especially Dispensationalists. In this view, history is divided into dispensations (eras), with the current era belonging to the gentiles, before the final era when Christ returns to sit on a throne in Jerusalem to reign over Israel and the nations for 1000 years (a millennium). Combining a literal reading Revelation 20:1-7 with other passages, Dispensationalists expect a rapture, tribulation and war (Armageddon), followed by Christ's return and millennial reign, ending with a great white throne judgment as we go off in heaven. For decades current events were read as all heading towards this conclusion, with some proponents expecting Jesus' return by 1988 (within 40 years of Israel becoming a nation again).⁶

In this view, the return of the Jews to Israel opens the door for Jesus to come back. Consequently, Christians should provide every possible support for Israel so this can happen. This view has been particularly influential in the United States.

There are, of course, many other views of eschatology (study of the end). There are other ways to understand Revelation—as visions God gave John to help the seven churches, rather than as a chart of events that are still future for us and meant little to them. There other ways to understand the Old Testament prophets: as fulfilled in Christ, rather than in national Israel today.

⁶ For example, Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* sold more than a million copies.

So, what are we to say about national Israel today?

Should we be horrified at how Israel's government mistreats the Palestinians with whom they were supposed to share the land, at how Israel wants to conduct what looks like an ethnic cleansing in Gaza, at its acts as aggression against neighbouring nations, bombing sites in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq?

Should we support Israel no matter what because they are God's chosen people and Christ's return depends on it? Or should we speak truth to power and call out evil in Israel the way the Old Testament prophets so often did? Or should we get on with promoting Messiah Jesus as the only Saviour for the world, Jew and gentile, the way Paul did? What has God called us to do?

Let's see what Paul has to say.

3.2 Missing the Messiah (11:1-6)

Paul's grief is that his people rejected the Messiah God sent them (Romans 9). But God does not respond by rejecting them. Like Hosea, God is still wooing his unfaithful partner, revealing himself to them in his Anointed. And Paul himself is an example:

Romans 11:1-6 (NIV)

¹ I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.

² God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel:

³ "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? [1 Kings 19:10]

⁴ And what was God's answer to him?

"I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." [1 Kings 19:14]

⁵ So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.

⁶ And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Elijah lived at the time of the divided kingdom, when Israel (the northern nation). David's descendants still reigned over Judah, but Israel refused the LORD's anointed, appointing their own kings. In Elijah's time, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were replacing the LORD's prophets with ones that promoted the Canaanite god Baal. They'd rejected *the LORD and his Anointed* (Psalm 2:2).

The Israel of Paul's time had also rejected *the LORD and his Anointed*, handing Christ over to be crucified. Paul can relate to Elijah: a lone voice proclaiming the LORD's reign, while his people want to kill him (compare Acts 22:22). Paul takes comfort in God's response to Elijah: a significant minority in Israel had not pledged allegiance to Baal, and a significant minority of Jews had given their allegiance (faith[fulness]) to the Christ in the first century.

That continues to be the case today. Some recognize Jesus as Messiah (Messianic Jews). Others treat Jesus as an ancient teacher or a troublemaker. Many follow the way of life defined in the Talmud (Rabbinic tradition on fulfilling the requirements of the Torah). There are various “denominations” within Judaism (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, etc.).⁷ Perhaps the majority of Jews (like most Australians) do not actively practice a faith.

So, how are we, as Christians, to relate to them?

Romans 11:7-8 (NIV)

⁷ What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened,

⁸ as it is written:

“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day.” [Deuteronomy 29:4]

Deuteronomy 29 was Moses’ call for the second generation of the nation of Israel to commit to the covenant with the LORD. The first generation saw God delivering them from Pharaoh, providing for them in the wilderness, preserving them when attacked. Yet they did not inherit the land God had promised his chosen people, because their hearts were hard, i.e. they would not trust the LORD to lead them in.

Now they’ve done it again: refusing to trust the Messiah God provided to save them. Jesus often compared his generation to the unfaithful generation that refused God’s leadership (e.g. Matthew 11:16; 12:39-45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36).

King David had the same frustration. In Psalm 69, David complains to the LORD as he tried to lead God’s people. He felt engulfed (v. 2), abused (v. 4), shamed (v. 7), insulted (v. 9), sinking to the depths (v. 15). He called on God to take his side (vv. 13-18), to give his unfaithful people what they deserved (vv. 21-28). Specifically:

Romans 11:9-10 (NIV)

⁹ And David says:

“May their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them.

¹⁰ May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever.” [Psalm 69:22-23]

David’s prayer is a curse on his people, calling on God to give his people what they deserve. That’s justice as we expect it. That’s how justice operated under the Torah. The connection with Deuteronomy 29:4 is *eyes that are darkened/cannot see*. The result is *their backs were bent* in service to other nations instead of participating in God’s reign through his Anointed.

It’s no surprise, therefore, that Israel refused the son of David God sent to save his people. As their king, Jesus bore the insults of his people on their behalf (Psalm 69:9, quoted in Romans 13:3). But as Jesus suffered at the hands of his people, he did not call down a curse on this injustice. He called on the heavenly court to forgive them, to release them from their enslavement to evil (Luke 23:34).

⁷ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-jewish-denominations/> accessed 2025-07-15.

Even though most of Israel remained unfaithful, King Jesus' prayer stands before the throne, calling for their release and the release of the nations they colluded with:

Romans 11:11 (NIV)

¹¹ Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

Even today, 2000 years later, the Jewish people are not beyond God's salvation. The name *Jesus* (*Yeshua* or *Joshua* in Hebrew) means "the LORD saves." He was born to *save his people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21).

The unfaithfulness of God's chosen people does not mean that God's project to save the world through them has failed. But some of the tribes barely exist at all in the census of 1 Chronicles 2–9. They were intermingled with the nations when Assyria settled other nations in the region of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24). Consequently, if God wants to save all the tribes of Israel, he'll need to save gentiles as well. That's the history behind Paul's assertion that *because of their transgression, salvation has come to the gentiles* as God raised him up to reign over all the peoples of the earth.

Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32 lamented Israel's unfaithfulness, with God saying in verse 21, "I will make them **envious** by those who are not a people." Paul quoted that statement in the previous chapter (Romans 10:19). Paul's prayer for his people is that, as they see the nations coming under the authority of the Jewish Messiah, it will move them to recognize the one whom God sent to save them.

The salvation of God's people is what Paul expects:

Romans 11: 12 (NIV)

¹² But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!

The inclusion of the Jewish people into the reign of the Messiah is what God intends. Paul expects every knee will bow, and every tongue will acknowledge that Messiah Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:11). If God raised his Messiah out of death to reign over his people, God is able resurrect *the twelve tribes*, even the ones that effectively died out (Acts 26:7-8). We anticipate God saving the whole world in Christ—Jew and gentile.

As Phoebe reads Paul's letter to the house churches in Rome, she turns her eyes to the gentiles. Paul calls them to treat the Jewish believers with value and hope:

Romans 11:13-16 (NIV)

¹³ I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

Israel as a nation died 500+ years before Jesus. “Dry bones” was how Ezekiel saw them. “*Can these dry bones live?*” God asked him after Assyria had destroyed Israel and Babylon had captured Judah (Ezekiel 37:3). God promised to resurrect both parts of the divided kingdom: “*There will be one king over them and they will never again be two nations or divided into two kingdoms... My servant David will be king over them, and they will have one shepherd*” (Ezekiel 37:22, 24).

It was when God resurrected the Messiah that the dead nation of Israel/Judah was raised to life. God's Messiah gave his life for and to his people, the unified kingdom that comes to life in him. Some see the rebirth of Israel as a nation in 1948 as the fulfilment of Ezekiel 37, but modern Israel is not a kingdom with a Davidic king; it's a democracy with a Knesset (parliament). The kingdom of God was reborn in the resurrection of the Messiah.

Jesus is *the descendant of David* promised in the Scriptures, now enthroned as *the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead*. The nations are now called to give him *the obedience that comes through faith[fulness]*, so that all believers together are God's *loved and holy people, in the Lord Jesus the Messiah* (Romans 1:1-6).

Paul's gospel gives a very different answer to the question raised by the Jewish apocalyptic literature regarding how God would deal with the gentiles in order to restore his people. Paul's answer is that Israel's transgression resulted in God including the gentiles in the Messiah's leadership. God never rejected his people: he included them—and the nations—in the reborn kingdom of God that exists in the authority of the resurrected Messiah.

3.3 Grafting the nations into what God planted (11:17-24)

The pastoral application for the gentile believers is to honour the Jewish people God's planting to bring salvation to the world:

Romans 11:17-18 (NIV)

¹⁷ 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,
¹⁸ do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.



Grafted fruit tree

This is a beautiful image of the relationship between Jews and gentiles. We started out as separate family trees, but God has grafted us all into the Messiah as a single tree under God's cultivation. Since we share his life, we can't disparage each other without hurting ourselves and damaging what God is growing in Christ.

The image of Israel as the planting of the LORD begins at the Red Sea. God freed them from Pharaoh and Moses declared, “*You will bring them in and **plant** them on the mountain of your inheritance*” (Exodus 15:17).

But the vine God transplanted from Egypt was torn down when Assyria destroyed Israel (Psalm 80:8-19) and Babylon captured Judah (Isaiah 5:1-7). Although they were unfaithful, God remained faithful, promising to plant his people again with a new covenant:

Jeremiah 31:27-28, 31 (NIV)

²⁷ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will **plant** the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. ²⁸ Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to **plant**,” declares the LORD. ...

³¹ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a **new covenant** with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.”

The New Testament sees Christ as the one who established the new covenant that restored his Father's kingdom (Mark 14:24; Hebrews 7:22–9:28). This new covenant gives the Messiah kingship over the whole earth. So now, gentiles who *were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise ... are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household* (Ephesians 2:12, 19).

Israel was God's vine, but who was the *root* of the kingdom? After the kingdom fell, God gave this promise:

Isaiah 11:1-2, 5 (NIV) (compare Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-16)

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his **roots** a Branch will bear fruit. ² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him ... ⁵ Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The kingdom exists in the king. Jesse (David's father) was the root of the kingship God appointed, but that kingdom was cut down. God promised that another king would sprout from David's family line, the **anointed** of the LORD who would set things *right* through his *faithfulness*.

Paul says God's *righteousness* has been revealed in the *faithfulness* of the Messiah (Romans 3:21-26). That is astoundingly good news, for when God sent the Messiah to his people, they were *unfaithful* to him (betraying him). The city would fall with its unfaithful leaders (Luke 21:6, 20) as those who attempted to cut the Messiah from God's vine would find they were cut out of his vine (John 15:1-4).

The Messiah is not only the *Branch* from David's line, he's the **Root** of the kingdom God planted when he established the heavens and the earth (Revelation 5:5; 22:16).

That's the point Paul makes in verse 17-18. It's the Messiah whose life supports the vine—both the natural and grafted branches—so no branch should consider itself superior to the others who share in his life.

Paul explains the analogy further:

Romans 11:19-24 (NIV)

¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.”

²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

²² Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

The natural branches are the physical descendants of the twelve tribes. The wild branches are people of other nations who have been grafted into the Messiah by giving him their allegiance (faith). The point is that God has not rejected his people; he is more than willing to graft the Jewish people back into the Messiah where they belong if they will give him their loyalty (faith) instead of persisting in unbelief (unfaithfulness to the Messiah).

3.4 How “all Israel” will be rescued (11:25-32)

Romans 11:25-27 (NIV)

²⁵ I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, ²⁶ and in this way **all Israel** will be saved. As it is written:

“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.” [Isaiah 59:20-21]

²⁷ And

“This is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”
[Jeremiah 31:33-34]

What did Paul mean by saying, *In this way all Israel will be saved?* (verse 26)

- Some believe that all Jews will be converted to Christianity at some point that is still future for us. If this era is *the times of the gentiles* (Luke 21:24), one day God will say, “The full number of Gentiles has now come in,” and remove the hardness of heart from the Jews so they can all recognize Jesus as Messiah.
- Others believe that “Israel” is redefined as the kingdom that now exists in the Messiah. Paul said, *Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel* (9:6). Unfaithful branches are pruned, and wild branches grafted in. God’s “Israel” (kingdom, nation, people, vine) now consists of all who give allegiance to the Messiah and are therefore the kingdom of God rescued in him.

The quotations from Isaiah and Jeremiah help us understand what Paul means.

Isaiah promised a *deliverer* who would rescue his people from the exile. God would put on his armour and come to them to save them (Isaiah 59:16-17), and the nations would see the light of his reign (Isaiah 60:1-3).

Jeremiah promised that God's reign would be re-established by a new covenant characterized by heart-faithfulness rather than Torah-obedience. As discussed above, the New Testament understands Jeremiah 31 as fulfilled in Christ.

It's in the Messiah that the people-of-God are now defined. As Paul said elsewhere, *Those who have faith are the children of Abraham*. It's in the Messiah that the seed of Abraham is named, so *there is neither Jew nor gentile ... for you are all one in Messiah Jesus* (Galatians 3:7, 15-19, 28).

This is what Paul has been saying from the start (Romans 1–3): our heavenly sovereign has remained faithful to his people even when Israel and the nations proved unfaithful.

Romans 11:28-32 (NIV)

²⁸ As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, ²⁹ for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. ³² For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

The goal is therefore to function as one unified people in the Messiah, regardless of whether we were Jewish or gentile when we came to faith in the Messiah.

3.5 Theology leads to doxology (11:33-36)

Studying God (theology) leads to praising God (doxology):

Romans 11:33-36 (NIV)

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

³⁴ "Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?" [Isaiah 40:13]

³⁵ "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" [Job 41:11]

³⁶ For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

God's wisdom is off the scale. As ruler over a world that rebelled against his authority, our heavenly sovereign has found a path for the restoration of his people into his reign through the cross of the Messiah. What God did is astounding, unheard of!

The prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow (1 Peter 1:10-11). **Isaiah** may have provided counsel to

earthly kings, but even he could not understand all God had in mind, let alone offer wisdom on how God might resolve the human condition.

Job did try to take God to court over how he was running the world. Job wasn't from the Israel's tribes, but from another land (Job 1:1). He believed people should get what they deserve, but that wasn't his experience. His friends believed the same thing, but could make no sense of Job's case. When God finally meets with him, God overturned Job's understanding of justice: "Who says I owe you anything? Why do you think I must repay you for what you do?"

Now, there's a radical thought. In the beginning, God protected Cain from the family who thought Cain should die for killing his brother (Genesis 4:15-16). Later, God conceded a justice system based on retribution (Genesis 9:5). God gave the same concession to Israel (Exodus 21:24). But when the Messiah came, he insisted that this is not how God wants us to live because it's not what God does (Matthew 5:38-48). As Paul is about to tell us, justice belongs to God, and he wants us to give restoration, not retribution (Romans 12:17).

This is really significant. We may need to rethink some of our theologies of atonement if we based them on retribution, as if God demanded that someone had to die.

3.6 So What?

What other questions do you have in response to Romans 9–11?

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After listening to Romans 9–11, what's your understanding of the relationship God wants Jews and gentiles to have? How do we who believe Jesus is the Messiah represent his leadership to all his people?

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How do we represent our Lord to people who do not share his ethnicity? Palestinians for example? Bethlehem is in Palestinian territory, and—like many in Gaza today—Jesus' family had to flee to save his life (Matthew 2:13). How do we embody his teaching on how his people should treat their neighbours? (Luke 10:29-37)



Bethlehem Bible College entrance.
Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

For next week, read Romans 12.