



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 11

St. Paul concludes Romans chapter ten with a statement about God's continued concern for Israel: He has consistently reached out to them, even though they disobey and rebel against Him (10:21). This leads to the opening of chapter eleven: "Has God cast away His people! Certainly not" (11:1)! For St. Paul to conclude that God has rejected Israel would be absurd, for he himself is an Israelite (11:1; see also 9:3). Theodoret, a fifth century bishop of Cyr in Syria, notes that St. Paul could also have referred to other Jews who were believing Christians:

Paul could have supported his statement by referring to the 3,000 who believed at Jerusalem (Acts 2:41) and to the many thousands spoken of by St. James (Acts 21:20), not to mention all those Jews of the diaspora who believed the message. But instead he uses himself as an example.

As you can see in Romans chapters nine and ten, some first century Jewish readers might interpret the Epistle to the Romans as meaning that God has rejected the Jews. It is certainly true that some first century Jews, in their rejection of Jesus Christ, were in rebellion against God (see Romans 10:3-4). At the same time, however, God foreknew that some first century Jews *would* accept Christ as their Messiah (11:2); the number was small, as in the days of the Holy Prophet Elijah when only 7,000 Israelites remained faithful to God (11:2-4), but there is nonetheless a "remnant" of Israel who accept God's grace (11:5).

Verses five and six summarize a key point from chapter nine: a person cannot make him- or herself righteous, but instead must depend upon the grace of God for righteousness. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains, "God does not choose those Jews who fulfill the works of circumcision and the Sabbath, but those who simply respond to His grace and pardon. That is, after all, what *grace* means."

St. Paul's allusion in Romans 9:17-18 to God hardening Pharaoh's heart makes it easier to understand 11:7-10. Those who rejected Christ, who rejected true knowledge of God's plan for their salvation, were subsequently hardened and made incapable of true spiritual insight. To demonstrate that this lack of insight was foretold in the Old Testament, St. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 29:4 (Romans 11:8). Just as the ancient Israelites saw their deliverance from Egypt and yet still refused to credit this salvation to God, so some first century Jews knew about Jesus and yet still refused to accept Him. St. Gennadios, a fifth century bishop of Constantinople, succinctly states, "The spirit of stupor prevented them from making the hard choice of repentance and conversion." St. Paul similarly uses Psalm 69:22 as evidence that these Jews misunderstood and misused the Law, ultimately rendering themselves unable to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law (11:9-10). St. Paul's point is that God allowed these Jews to suffer the inevitable consequences of their rebellion.

Romans 11:11 at first seems quite obscure: "I say then, have they (meaning the Jews) stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not!" St. Paul is rhetorically asking, "Is Israel now completely ruined and

irrelevant to God's purposes?" Not only are they not completely ruined or irrelevant, but even their disobedience serves God's purposes by allowing salvation to come to the Gentiles. While Israel had previously kept their religious treasure - their relationship with God - to themselves, their rejection of Christ resulted in the Gospel being taken to the Gentiles throughout the Roman world.

Hope is not lost for the Jews. First, God intends Israel to be provoked to jealousy by seeing the Gentiles enjoying the full benefits of a deep relationship with God (Romans 11:11, 13). Fr. Lawrence Farley explains, "Here are these benighted Gentiles delighting in *their* Scriptures, worshipping *their* Messiah, loving *their* ancestral God, and overflowing with joy! How can they let the pagans alone have all this?" This is a key reason for St. Paul's ministry to the Gentiles (11:13): it is not only so that the Gentiles may hear the Gospel - as important as that is - but also so that Jews will see the Gentiles' joyful relationship with God and ultimately return to Him. This return to God by the Jews will be a glorious miracle equal to resurrection from the dead (11:15), and will be a blessing to the world (11:12), as the fourth century Christian Ambrosiaster teaches, "It is clear that the world will be even richer in good people if those who have been blinded are converted."

St. Paul, beginning in verse thirteen, starts to address the Gentiles. This becomes particularly important in verses 16-32, where he warns the Gentiles against feeling superior to the Jews. It would have been easy for Gentile Christians to think, "The Jews rejected Christ, but we accepted Him. The Jews are therefore evil, and we are superior to them." This, however, would have been a terribly wrong attitude.

St. Paul uses the example of a wild olive tree - a common tree that would have been well known by the Romans - to demonstrate the important relationship between the Jews and Gentiles. Israel - the roots and trunk of the tree - is holy; the Gentiles - branches - have been grafted on to this holy tree (Romans 11:16-17). Because God's promises to the Jews support the Gentiles, the Gentiles have no reason to consider themselves superior (11:18); in fact, they should be humbled, because they can rebel and earn God's displeasure as easily as did the Jews (11:20-22). Blessed Jerome, one of the great scholars of the fourth and fifth centuries, explains how the olive tree ties together all this teaching: "We should not boast against the olive tree whose branches have been broken off but rather fear. For if the natural branches have been broken off, how much more, we who have been grafted on the wild olive should fear, lest we become like them."

Furthermore, the Gentiles should never believe that they have replaced the Jews: those Jews who accept Christ and return to worship of the true God will be "grafted into" the people of God, once again sharing in the salvation that was promised to their people (Romans 11:23-24).

St. Paul now reveals to the Gentiles a great mystery (meaning a past secret purpose of God that is now revealed): the current hardening of Israel will lead to the "fullness of the Gentiles" being saved, and the fullness of the Gentiles being saved as a result of Israel's hardness will itself ultimately lead to the salvation of Israel (Romans 11:25-26). God has not rejected Israel: instead, as the Holy Prophet Isaiah prophesies, Jesus has come from Israel, and ultimately the Jews will turn to Him and be justified (11:26-27; see Isaiah 59:20; 27:9; Jeremiah 31:31-34). The first century Jews may have been enemies of the Gospel, but God's promises to them remain (11:28-29).

Ambrosiaster summarizes St. Paul's teaching:

However seriously the Jews may have sinned by rejecting the gift of God, and however worthy they may be of death, nevertheless, because they are the children of good people, whose privileges and many benefits from God they have received, they will be received with joy when they return to the faith, because God's love for them is stirred up by the memory of their ancestors.

History demonstrates that God is merciful to the disobedient. The disobedience of Israel led to mercy being shown to the previously disobedient Gentiles (Romans 11:30); the mercy shown to the Gentiles will ultimately lead to the Jews accepting God's mercy (11:31).

St. Paul concludes with a doxology proclaiming the beauty and power of God's work. We humans could never have devised a plan as wonderful and powerful as the plan of salvation that St. Paul has explained in his Epistle (Romans 11:34-35). St. John Chrysostom explains St. Paul's purpose in concluding with this doxology:

After going back to former times and looking back to God's original dispensation of things, whereby the world has existed up to the present time, and having considered the special provision which he had made for all eventualities, Paul is struck with awe and cries aloud, making his hearers confident that what he is saying will come to pass.

St. Paul reminds us that God is the source - and ultimate point - of all good things (Romans 11:36). Theodoret of Cyr proclaims, "God Himself made all things and he rules in perpetuity over everything which He has made. Everyone ought to turn to Him, to thank Him for what they asked for and to put their trust in Him for the future. They ought to honor Him as well." St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the foremost teachers of the fourth century, notes that our lives should be transformed by God's gracious work: "What person who believes that he lives 'from him and through him and to him' will dare to make the One Who encompasses in Himself the life of each of us a witness of a life which does not reflect Him?"