



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 19th June 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

Romans chapter 11:1-36

The Green-Fingered God

Introduction: A Chapter about God

Today we reach the end of three difficult chapters in the middle of Romans. Congratulations if you've come right through with us: we've had to work hard. But, for me at least, it has been worth it. I've gained a lot from wrestling with these chapters and, if you've just joined us for the first time today, I hope you'll get some benefit from that work—because it seems to me that the harder one works at the Bible, the simpler it becomes.

So, let me start with one preliminary point: the Bible is a book about God, it is not primarily about human beings. So, when we come to a passage like Romans 11, we should not begin by expecting it to answer man-centred questions like: What should be the attitude of Christians to Jewish people? Or, what is the place of the Jews in the future purposes of God for humanity? Romans 11 is here primarily to teach us about God. That is why it ends with that doxology at verse 33-36: please look at it and note that it does not say, "Oh, the depth of the disobedience of God's chosen people, the Jews", but (verse 33): *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!* It is all about the wisdom and knowledge and judgements of God. The chapter is about God [so, remember, when you come to the Bible, always to ask first, "What is this teaching about God?" before we start asking it questions about ourselves].

1) A Remnant Chosen by Grace

vv 1-10

In these chapters Paul has been facing the question: Has God broken His promises to the Jews? (In which case, His promises cannot be trusted). *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* (v 1). Paul, a converted Jew, was himself living proof that God still had purposes for the Jews. *God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace* (vv 2-5).

Now, a remnant does not mean a rump. It is not as though Sir Clive Woodward, on the British and Irish Lions rugby tour to New Zealand, sustains so many injuries to his players, that eventually he ends up with just 15 players to meet the All Blacks in the first test. That would be a rump. This is a remnant chosen by grace. They may be few in number. They may be weak in strength. But they have been chosen by the grace of God. They are not simply an assorted group of individuals who happen not to have fallen away from God—just those left after injury.

No—it is a group chosen by God. But not because they deserve it. It is simply by God's grace. *And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace* (v 6). To be chosen is a wonderful and a humbling experience. When Thomas Edison was working on his first light bulb, he handed the finished prototype to a young helper who was to carry it into another laboratory, but the assistant dropped it and it burst. The whole team had to work another 24 hours to make another light bulb. When it was finished, Edison deliberately handed it to the same young assistant. It must have meant the world for that

young man to be chosen for that responsibility again, after his first failure. For the believer to know it is God's grace that has saved him or her is exciting and deeply humbling.

All around us we can see hardness and blindness to spiritual things: *What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling-block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever"* (vv 7-10). Even among God's own people those who refused to hear God's voice were given over to spiritual indifference. Talking to some people about God is like taking a stone-deaf man to an opera or a blind person to an art gallery and expecting them to appreciate the beauty on display there. And even the Jews were in that state.

2) It's not over yet

vv 11-32

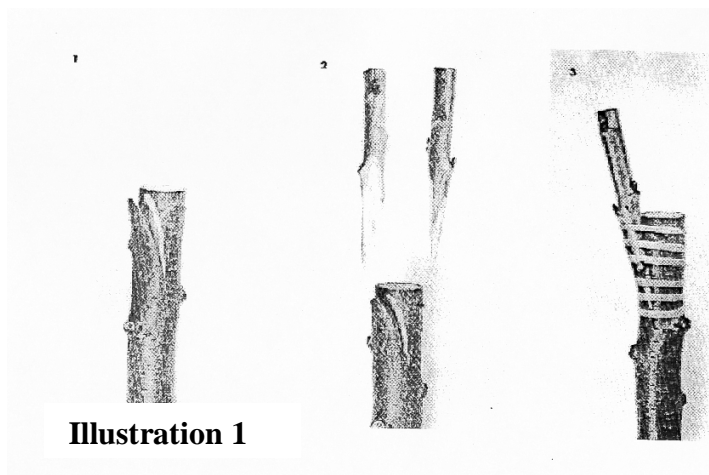
It's not over yet, says Paul. It's not the end of the story. *Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!* (vv 11-12). There used to be a sports quiz based on a famous saying from 1966, "They think it's all over". And it can be a fatal mistake to make in sport. Inter-Milan may just have made it at half-time in the European cup final, when they were sitting on a 3-0 lead over Liverpool and we all know where that ended—or we ought to! Well, it is emphatically not all over for the Jews according to Romans 11. God has not finished with them.

First, we must appreciate how God had already used them—...*because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles...For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world...* (vv 11-12, 15). The persecution of the Jewish race, which has been a blot on Western civilisation for 2000 years, finds its original cause in the fact that it was the Jews who had crucified Jesus. But Paul says that we should not look back to the cross with an attitude of blame for those who were responsible, but rather with immense gratitude that Jesus died for our sins. "Thank God He died!" we are to say. Not "Curse the Jews for killing Him!" *Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious* (v 11).

In fact, our attitude must be humble and grateful and Paul rams home his point with some illustrations: *If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. 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, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. 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 (16-22).

Grafting is the process of implanting a shoot from one plant into the trunk of another [Illustration 1]. How stupid of the shoot to despise the trunk! Rather, says Paul, be grateful for the Jews, be humble before them, and be concerned for them: *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. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (vv 11-15). The Gentile attitude to Jews should be to treat them so well, so gently, with such gratitude and love, that they would be envious of the Christian Messiah and long to come to know Him for themselves. How wrong we have been in our anti-Semitism! How humble, earnest and tender we Christians should be in our evangelism of Jews!

But notice also how expectant we should be about their future. First Paul hints at it: *Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all!... how much greater riches will their fullness bring!... For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?... And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 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!* (vv 11, 12, 15, 23-24). Then he states it more clearly: *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."* (vv 25-27). 'All Israel will be saved' does not mean every single individual Israelite. Paul is discussing the relationship between 2 groups of people: Jews (which he calls Israel) and non-Jews (which he calls Gentiles). And he says the former, the Jews, still have a place in God's ultimate salvation. God has not finished with them. It is not over yet. We have not reached the end of the story. Just as we see the full number of the Gentiles (v 25) coming in, so all the elect of Israel, the true Israel, will be saved.

So, there was nothing final in what had happened to Israel so far: *As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now*

received mercy as a result of their disobedience, 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. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all (vv 28-32). Just as, if you look at the working parts of an old-fashioned wrist watch, you will see wheels moving in opposite directions [Illustration 2], but they still serve a common purpose in getting the hands of the wristwatch to tell the time, so even the disobedience and sin of man and the judgement of God can work together with His election and grace to achieve His over-riding purpose, which is mercy: *For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all* (v 32). By all men Paul means 'every category of man' i.e. Jew and Gentile. So God will save Jew and Gentiles in the same way—by mercy, through the death of Christ, by His grace. (Paul is not saying every single person will be saved).

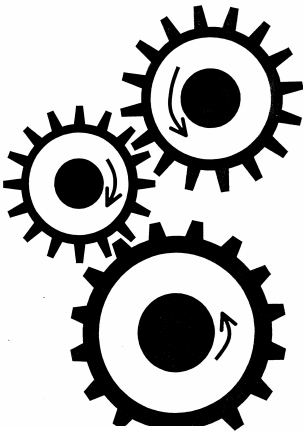


Illustration 2

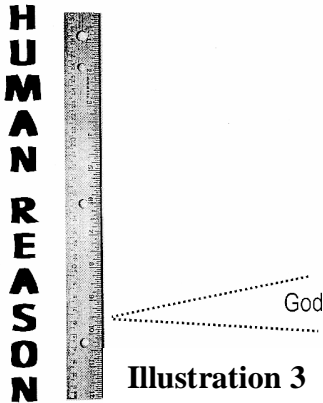
Now, I think it is difficult to decide exactly what this chapter means for the future of the Jewish race. But remember our preliminary point this morning: first and foremost, this is telling us about what God is like: that He is a God of mercy, who has not finished yet. We human beings are fixed at one, ever-moving, point in time. The purposes of God are eternal, outside time and unconstrained as we are by time. They are not over. Is there a person in your life you are tempted to give up on? Perhaps a husband or a wife, or a child or a parent. Remember: God deals with people over their lifetimes, not to our timetables. He is a not-over-yet kind of God.

Perhaps we have been tempted to give up on ourselves, to think, "I am as I am, and I can never be any different, and there's an end to the matter." Well, it is not over yet. And God has a trick or two up His sleeve. And this universe, and my life within it, are not here to fulfil my purposes and expectations, but His. If your time at university is about to end, don't think that God has finished His work in you. He may be about to start—in terms of testing (this long vac).

He has not finished with you or me. He has not finished with those we love. He has not finished with the Jewish race. He is a not-over-yet sort of God. We may not know exactly what He has in store for them and us, but it will reflect His glorious character. We've not seen yet what he will make of this universe: *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen* (vv 33-36).

3) The Mind of the Lord

I've called this The Mind of the Lord because that is where Paul is trying to lead us, and at the end of the day, it is a journey we can never complete in this life: *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?"* (vv 32-34).



Back in chapter 9 I introduced these diagrams [Illustrations 3 and 4] to help us grasp what Paul is saying: *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"* (9:20).

Notice that this doxology, which rounds off this section of Paul's letter (chapters 9-11), in an outpouring of adoring wonder and praise, is prompted by what we do not know

about God, rather than what we do. Paul is not breaking into praise because he has found a final and complete solution to the difficult problems posed by the Jewish rejection of Jesus. That solution lies with God, and it is still not fully revealed to us. But there are enough chinks of light for us to trust the

goodness of God and know we are not condemned to meaninglessness, nor to be the victims of arbitrary divine omnipotence. Remember, we don't have God under a microscope [Illustration 5] as something smaller than us. We're peeking through a telescope [Illustration 6] with awe and wonder. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio", Hamlet says scathingly to his friend, "Than are dreamt of in your philosophy".



Are your and my minds open to the possibility of a God far beyond our intellectual grasp? There can be no other: *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen* (vv 33-36). If we have a God we have got all sewn up, He can't be God at all. But if there is a God, we must be humble in our adoration of Him.

