

“The Big Picture”
Romans 11:11-24
September 3, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

After interrupting our series on Romans to consider this summer the fruit of the Spirit, we return today to our study of this important book. We left off in the middle of a section addressing the thorny problem of Jewish unbelief. If Jewish scholars were the experts on their own Messiah, why did they reject Jesus? In chapters 9-11 Paul gives four answers to that question. Chapter 9 says that those rejecting Jesus were not of the elect, while chapter 10 says that they didn't believe because they were trusting their own righteousness. Chapter 11 states two more reasons that are introduced by two questions (v. 1, 11). In verse 1, Paul asked, **“Has God rejected his people?”** He then clearly rejects that notion with a reminder of the biblical theme of the remnant. Israel had frequently experienced times of significant unbelief, but God had always preserved a remnant of faithful Israelites. In other words, Israel's unbelief was only partial.

Today's passage is introduced with another question. **“Did they stumble in order that they might fall?”** (v. 11). Paul clearly rejects this idea as well, distinguishing between stumbling and falling. Israel has indeed stumbled because of their unbelief, but they have not fallen. All is not lost, because their current condition of unbelief is only temporary. Paul argues in this passage that a time is coming when there will be widespread repentance among the Jews. Many will come to faith in Jesus in what Paul calls a time of fullness (v. 12). So Jewish unbelief is both partial (v. 1-10) and temporary (v. 11-24).

What is the relevance to us of a passage such as this one? I doubt that many of you had your sleep interrupted last night by theological questions surrounding Jewish unbelief. That was an issue far more relevant in Paul's day than our own. Even so, in dealing with the challenges of Jewish unbelief, a biblical perspective emerges in this passage that has relevance to us. We see here how Paul's big-picture perspective informed the specific topic he is addressing. We see here a big picture perspective on history and a big-picture perspective on the importance of faith.

Every morning when I leave my house to drive to the church, my phone sends me a message about which route I should take. There are two options, and the app on the phone is able to see the big picture and advise me accordingly. It sees where there might be delays due to heavy traffic or accidents, something that is invisible to me but very helpful to know. Similarly, God has access to an even more important big picture, something that would otherwise not be available to us, but also very helpful to know.

I. Big-Picture Optimism – v. 11-16

Paul is claiming that though Israel's rejection of Jesus could be characterized as a stumbling, it was not a fall. In other words, it was a temporary setback, not a catastrophic end. He expands on this answer by summarizing all of history during this period between the two comings of Christ. It can be summarized in three steps. First, Israel sinned by rejecting Jesus and crucifying him. Second, this crucifixion led to salvation coming to the nations. Third, as the nations embrace Jesus, Jews will be made jealous and many will come to faith. When this last step occurs, it will mark the end of this era and the return of Christ. Verse 15 is a good summary of this. **“For if their rejection [of Jesus as the Messiah] means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”** Some commentators interpret that phrase “life from the dead” figuratively, but I agree with the many who understand it to be literal, describing the general resurrection to occur at the return of Jesus.

These words are saturated with a surprising degree of optimism. I say it was surprising because the specific details Paul was dealing with were tragic. Remember that this entire section of Romans is dealing with the painful problem of Jewish unbelief. It was painful to Paul at every level: spiritually, emotionally, and physically. We saw the spiritual and emotional pain back in chapter 9, where Paul wrote, **“I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart”** (9:2) because of Jewish unbelief. Paul wrote elsewhere of his physical pain that resulted from this, including multiple beatings, stonings, and imprisonments. Paul's optimism wasn't achieved by ignoring unpleasant and difficult news.

Was Paul's optimism a feature of his personality or of his faith? I once heard about twin boys who exhibited extreme cases of optimism and pessimism. The parents were worried about the extremes of behavior and attitude and finally took the boys to see a psychologist. The psychologist observed them a while and decided to attempt an intervention by putting the boys in two completely different rooms. The pessimist was placed in a room filled with all the toys a boy could want. The other room was filled with horse manure, and the optimistic twin would be put in that room. Both boys were then observed through one-way mirrors. The pessimist looked at all the toys in his room and responded by complaining that there was no one to play with in that room. When they observed the optimist, they saw him digging through the manure. When the psychologist went into the room to ask him what he was doing, the optimistic boy replied that with all that manure, there had to be a pony in there somewhere.

Paul's optimism didn't arise from his personality like that of the optimistic twin. Rather, it came from his faith and specifically from his faith in the Bible's big picture. That big picture is that God created mankind in his image with a purpose of inviting us into his home. He made a home for us to live together with him in Eden, but humanity rejected God's home. Instead of writing off our race in judgment and death, God persevered in his purpose. He called Abraham and promised him a land where God would once again live with his people. But Abraham's descendants eventually rejected God again, crucifying God's Son. Still, God did not give up. That crucifixion ended up being the key to all of God's purposes, finally providing a way to rid humanity of the sin that has been our downfall forever. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, God will reconcile not only Israel, but all the nations as well. He will bring about, as he says in verse 12, "riches for the world." This is the big story of the Bible.

It is only as we live in God's big story that our outlook turns to one of optimism. In verses 13-16 we see Paul interpreting the details of his life through this lens of God's big story. Paul was called to be "an apostle to the Gentiles" (v. 13), and he understood that role as part of the big thing that God was doing in reconciling both Jew and Gentile. Specifically, he viewed his apostolic work as, **"somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them"** (v. 14). We're familiar with envy as a vice and sin, but apparently it can be a positive thing as well. When we envy something not rightfully ours, something that God has chosen not to give us, that's a sin. But when we envy something that God longs to give us, that's good. God longs to give the gift of new life through Jesus, along with everything that goes with it: a cleansed conscience, hope for the future, release from the fear of death and from all the bondages of sin.

As we all go about the task of putting each of our little stories into God's big story, we can view things similarly by seeing our entire lives as being something God will use to make others envious of the good gift of life in Christ. The Christian artist, through honest and beautiful art, can do that. The Christian schoolteacher, nurse, engineer, salesman, attorney, stay-at-home mom, all have the opportunity of going about their business in a way that God can use to be a light in a dark world. We keep our bedroom very dark at night. In our adjoining bathroom there is a GCFI outlet with a very small and weak light that serves only to show that the outlet is working properly. When the bright bathroom overhead lights are on, you don't notice it at all. But when it is completely dark, the light cuts through the complete darkness in a way that is impossible not to notice. As we shine like lights, even in small ways, God will use us for the big story he is writing. It is when we believe this that we become optimists.

II. Big-Picture Values – v. 17-24

Verses 17-24 of our text utilize a metaphor about the grafting of an olive tree. The Jewish nation is likened to an olive tree in which natural branches have been removed because of unbelief. Gentiles are likened to branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted into the first olive tree. Paul's point in this is to humble his Gentile readers and warn them lest they too should fall into unbelief.

This whole paragraph emphasizes the central importance of faith. The natural branches were cut off because of unbelief, while the wild branches were grafted in through faith. **“They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith”** (v. 20). A big-picture perspective on life gives great value to faith. It sees unbelief as the thing to be avoided above all else and faith as the thing to be nourished as much as possible. We have all experienced a change of values as we mature. When I was probably ten or eleven years old, I went to a little county fair with some friends and won a prize at one of those game booths. For my prize, I chose what to me looked to be far and away the best prize there. It was this shiny, large Bowie knife. I was so excited about that knife. It's understandable that a ten-year old boy might value what was really nothing more than a cheap replica. But mature people gain a little more discernment about real value, and I'm glad to report that this knife is no longer valued by me at all. If we had the wisdom and knowledge of God, we would come to the place of valuing faith more than anything else, because faith is the way we come into a relationship with God. Such things as success in a job, nice possessions, a generous 401(k) balance, or even a healthy body, turn out to be not unlike a Bowie knife for a ten-year-old boy. A bigger and better perspective on life will lead us to leave behind such things and value faith.

Let me point out a couple of things about faith that we see in this passage. First, the great enemy to faith is pride. Paul warns his readers, **“do not be arrogant toward the branches”** (v. 18). Pride and unbelief cause us to have a sense of superiority over others. Pride also causes us to think that we don't need others. **“Remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you”** (v. 18). The Gentiles are dependent on the roots of Judaism, upon Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs of Judaism. It takes humility to recognize our need of others, and especially to ask help of others.

The second thing I notice about faith in these verses is the necessary presence of fear. **“So do not become proud, but fear”** (v. 20). It then becomes clear that the kind of fear Paul has in mind is a fear of God's judgment. **“For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you”** (v. 21). He follows that up with a statement about two truths of God that we are to take into account. **“Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off”** (v. 22). Kindness is the attitude grandparents have to their grandchildren. “Severity” or

“strictness” as it is sometimes translated, was used in legal contexts and referred to the unyielding enforcement of the law. If the policeman pulls you over for going 36 in a 35-mph zone, that is strictness. If Christianity of several centuries ago emphasized the strictness of God to the detriment of his kindness, modern American Christianity does the opposite. Neither are biblical. Until we recognize that God is both kind and strict, we don’t understand the central message of the Bible. These two truths seem to us to be at odds with one another. God is both unimaginably kind and loving, while at the same time exercising by-the-book strictness.

We see this blend of God’s kindness and strictness throughout the Bible. Consider, for example, the well-known passage from Exodus 34. After the golden calf sin at Mt. Sinai, God said to Moses these memorable words. **“The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will be no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the father on the children and the children’s child, to the third and the fourth generation”** (Ex. 34:6-7). We want to say, “God, make up your mind. Which is it, forgiving iniquity or visiting the punishment for iniquity on generations of evildoers?” The genetic code of the Bible lies in seeing that it is both.

This is seen most clearly in the crucifixion of Jesus. This is the truth that God used to bring me to faith as a freshman in college. At the crucifixion we see both the kindness and strictness of God. Sin was laid on Jesus there. The Old Testament itself declares, **“Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”** (Gal. 3:13, quoting from Dt. 21:23). Jesus became cursed, taking the curse deserved by sinners like you and me though he had done no wrongs himself. And when sin was laid on Jesus, the strictness of God required his death. If God would ever make an exception to his strict standard, it would be when it was his son that was to be punished. But no exception was made, and the Son was forsaken by the Father. It was an act both of supreme kindness in that God provided a substitutionary sacrifice for us, and an act of extreme strictness. And now that strictness works in our favor, for God’s strictness forbids him from punishing the same sins twice.

CONCLUSION:

When we see the big picture, we can’t help but become optimists, and we learn to value faith. The indication that a person is doing that is the presence of both great confidence in God’s love along with humble fear. May God grant these to us all!