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GOD'S CERTAIN PURPOSE FOR HISTORY

Romans 11:11-15

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February 26, 2012

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February 26, 2012
Romans Lesson 69

God's Certain Purpose for History Romans 11:11-15

If you watch the evening news, you can probably relate to the wife who said to her husband, "Shall we watch the six o'clock news and get indigestion or wait for the eleven o'clock news and have insomnia?" (*Reader's Digest* [4/86], p. 2) It often seems that the world is out of control. In that vein, someone wrote a limerick (cited by James Boice, *The Last and Future World* [Zondervan], pp. 124-125):

God's plan made a hopeful beginning,
But man spoiled his chances by sinning,
We trust that the story
Will end in God's glory,
But at present the other side's winning.

When it seems that the other side is winning, whether in the world at large or in your personal world, it's important to remember that God has a certain purpose both for world history and for *your* history and that nothing can thwart His purpose.

In Paul's day, when it came to the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen, it seemed as if the other side was winning. Relatively few Jews were believing in Jesus Christ as Savior, while many Gentiles were coming into the kingdom. In light of God's many promises to Israel, this created a problem: Could God's promises fail? If His promises to the Jews failed because of their sin, then His promises to us in the church might fail, since we often sin.

Thus Paul devotes Romans 11 to deal with this matter of the future of the Jews in light of God's promises. In 11:1-10 he makes the point that Israel's rejection is partial, not total, in that there is a remnant of believing Jews. In 11:11-32 he makes the point that Israel's rejection is temporary, not permanent. God is using the Jews' present rejection of Christ to spread the gospel among the Gentiles. Then He will use the Gentiles' reception of the gospel to bring the Jews to faith in Christ. The end result will be great blessing on the whole world.

We come now to the second major section. In 11:11-15, we can apply Paul's discussion of God's plan for the Jews by saying,

Because God's purpose for history is certain, we should
commit ourselves to work for His glory
through taking the gospel to all people.

Paul states his theme in 11:11a: "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be!" Israel's failure was not fatal. He explains (11:11b), "But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous." Verse 12 elaborates on the first half of that statement: by the Jews' sin salvation has come to the Gentiles. Verses 13-14 expand on the second half, "to make them jealous." Paul explains to the Gentiles in the church in Rome his role in God's plan as the apostle to the Gentiles, part of which is to make Israel jealous. Then in verse 15, he restates the same truth as verse 12, that if the Jews' rejection resulted in the gospel going out to the world, then how much greater will their acceptance be. It's difficult to decide whether to include verse 16 with what goes before or with what follows, as it is a transitional verse. But we'll consider it next time, as it introduces the illustration of the olive tree that runs through verse 24.

I'm going to develop this message with some applications that come out of Paul's teaching here. But before I do that, I need to comment on the idea that Paul repeats here, that the Gentiles' reception of the gospel will move the Jews to jealousy so that at some point they will respond to the gospel. Motivating people to jealousy seems like a strange way to bring them to faith!

Paul is going back to the thought of Deuteronomy 32:21, which he cited in Romans 10:19. In Deuteronomy, Moses predicted Israel's apostasy through idolatry. He wrote (Deut. 32:21), "They have made Me jealous with what is not God; They have provoked Me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation." The thought is, just as Israel provoked God to jealousy and anger by their idolatry, so God will provoke Israel to repentance and faith when they jealously see those whom they would despise as being a "no-nation" or "a foolish nation" coming to know God.

Those of us who have reared children probably had a time where you asked your oldest child, "Would you like to go to the store with me?" She was busy playing, so she said, "No, I'll stay here." So you asked your second child, "Would you like to go with me?" She said, "Yes, Daddy, I'll go!" Immediately the oldest child said, "I'll go, too!" She jealously didn't want her younger sister getting some goodies at the store while she sat at home. Her jealousy motivated her to get in on the benefits that her younger sister had accepted.

That's the thought in Deuteronomy 32 and in Romans 11. The Jews said "no" to Christ, so the gospel was offered to the Gentiles. Many of them gladly accepted Christ. When the Jews see the Gentiles enjoying the blessings of salvation that were intended at first for them, they will repent and come to Christ. But Paul doesn't necessarily see this as happening in his day. He hopes to "save some of them" (11:14). But the widespread salvation of the Jews will only happen towards the climax of God's plan for history, after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (11:25-26).

These verses are interesting, but at first glance may not seem very relevant to where many of us are living. So I want to give five points that I think will apply to whatever trials you may be going through. In other words, although these verses show us God's purpose for the future of the Jews and Gentiles, we can bring these truths down to our present and future, especially when it seems that the bad guys are winning.

1. God has a purpose for history and it cannot fail.

Romans 11 is a great prophecy of what God will do in the future both with the Gentiles and the Jews. Paul isn't venturing his best educated guess at what will happen. Rather, he is unfolding God's great plan of redemption and how it is going to play out in world history. Note three things about God's purpose:

- A. God's purpose is a sure thing because it depends on His sovereign power to save His people.

Paul believed that the Jews would come to "fullness" or "fulfillment" (11:12). That word can be understood in a *qualitative* sense, meaning completeness. This would refer to the "full restoration of Israel to the blessings of the kingdom that she is now, as a

corporate entity, missing" (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 689). Or it could be taken in a *quantitative* sense, meaning "full number." This would mean that to the present remnant, a much greater number of Jews will be saved, "so as to 'fill up' the number of Jews destined for salvation" (*ibid.*). Both ideas may be present, but when you compare it with "the fullness of the Gentiles" in verse 25, it does seem to have a numerical sense (*ibid.*, p. 690). In other words, God has a specific number of elect Gentiles (11:25) and Jews (11:12), that constitutes the fullness of His plan for the ages (see, also, Rev. 6:11). To fulfill His sovereign plan, God must have the power to save these people.

What I'm getting at is that there are many who say that they believe the Bible, but they deny God's sovereign ability to save whom He chooses. Rather, they say, salvation is up to each person's free will. God has done His part by providing the Savior, they say, but now you must do your part. They believe that salvation depends on man's free will, not on God's sovereign choice.

But how could Paul prophesy that God is going to save the fullness of the Gentiles and the fullness of the Jews unless He is sovereign to save individuals? Granted, he is talking here in national terms, but nations are made up of individuals. So if God is going to bring the Jewish nation to their fullness of salvation, He has to be sovereign in saving individual Jewish people. If it were up to the free will of the Jews, Paul could not have had much hope for their future, because their past and present track records were dismal. They were a disobedient and obstinate people who refused God's offer of mercy (10:21).

This is a great encouragement for us both in terms of the overwhelming task of global missions and also in the often discouraging task of personal evangelism. We know from Revelation 5:9 that Jesus purchased with His blood "men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." They will come in faith to Jesus (John 6:37-39). So we can go to the lost people groups of the world and proclaim the good news with the confidence that Jesus has purchased some of them and they will respond.

The same is true in your personal witness. Sometimes people that you know and love seem either disinterested or hardened to the gospel. You may feel like Paul did in Corinth, which was a no-

toriously pagan and immoral city. The Jews in Corinth had resisted Paul's message and blasphemed (Acts 18:6). Paul was feeling afraid and may have been ready to catch the next boat for a friendlier place. But then the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision and said (Acts 18:9-10), "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

Did you catch that last phrase? The Lord had many people in Corinth who had not yet believed. Paul didn't know who they were, but as he went on preaching the gospel, they would come to faith. God's purpose to save His elect will not fail because it depends on His sovereign power. But He uses our proclamation of the gospel to do it.

B. God's purpose centers on His being glorified through the gospel.

Although it may shock you, the gospel is not primarily about your happiness, but about God's glory. The two are inseparable, of course, because as John Piper often says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." Paul wrote (Eph. 1:3-6):

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

A few verses later he adds (Eph. 1:10b-12):

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

Then, after saying that we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, he adds (Eph. 1:14), "who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory." He ends each section with the same refrain, "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (1:6) and "to

the praise of His glory" (1:12, 14). Our salvation and all the blessings that accompany it are to result in the praise of God's glory.

In Romans 8:29 Paul wrote, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren." The idea of the firstborn was that he had preeminence. God predestined us to be like Jesus so that Jesus would get all the glory.

To apply this to our text, Paul says that unbelievers (especially, unbelieving Jews) should look at us who have been saved and be moved to jealousy so that they say, "I want what you've got." They should see enough Christlike character in us that they are attracted to Jesus through us. In our marriages, with our children, on the job, and in our extended families, unbelievers should be jealous about the blessings of salvation—the visible fruit of the Spirit—that they see in us, so that they are drawn to Christ. The gospel is all about God's glory being reflected in us.

C. The gospel is riches for all who receive it.

As I commented in a recent message, Paul loves to describe the gospel as riches. He does that again here (11:12), "Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!" The two phrases are synonymous, repeated for emphasis. The Jews walked away from the treasures that are to be found in Christ, so that those treasures now are open for the taking to the Gentiles. As Paul expressed it in Ephesians 3:8, "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ."

Have you received the unfathomable riches of Christ? Are you digging into the Word every day to discover more and more of these riches? They are there for the taking, but we foolishly spend our money for what is not bread and our wages for what does not satisfy (Isa. 55:2a). God counsels His people (Isa. 55:2b), "Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance." Or as David exults (Ps. 16:11), "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever." God entreats you to satisfy your soul with the riches that are found in Jesus Christ.

These are wonderful truths, but the reality is that our human existence is marred both with our own sin and with the sins of others. So the question arises, "Does our sin somehow thwart God's sovereign purpose?"

2. Human unbelief and sin can never thwart God's sovereign purpose.

Our text is one of many examples in the Bible of how God overrules human sin and weaves it into His sovereign plan to glorify Himself through the gospel. The cross is perhaps the greatest example: Evil men crucified the sinless Son of God, and yet they inadvertently fulfilled God's predestined purpose (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; see, also, Gen. 50:20). Paul's subject in Romans 11 is how God used the unbelief of the Jews to take the gospel to the Gentiles, which in turn eventually will lead to the salvation of the Jews.

Paul's pattern in his missionary endeavors was to preach the gospel to the Jews first. If they rejected the message, then he would turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:45-48; 18:6; 28:24-28). So in this sense, the Jews' transgression resulted in salvation for the Gentiles.

Jesus predicted the same thing. He told the parable of the landowner who sent messengers to collect the profits from his vineyard, only to have the tenants beat and kill them. Finally, he sent his own son, thinking that they would respect him. But they killed him, too. Therefore, he would come and bring those evil tenants to a wretched end and rent out the vineyard to others who would pay him the proper proceeds. Then Jesus concluded (Matt. 21:43), "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people [lit., nation], producing the fruit of it." That "nation" is the church, made up of believing Gentiles and Jews (1 Pet. 2:9).

The point is, while we should never excuse or justify our sin by saying that good will come out of it (Rom. 3:8), at the same time we can take comfort in the fact human unbelief and sin can never thwart God's sovereign purpose. Where sin abounds, God's grace super-abounds (Rom. 5:20). He works all things, including the sins of others against us, together for good for those whom He has called to salvation (Rom. 8:28).

3. In light of God's guaranteed fulfillment of His purpose, we should magnify our ministry to the nations.

Romans 11:13, "Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry." Paul was concerned that some of the Gentile Christians in Rome might appeal to the fact that Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles to disdain the Jews and Jewish believers. But Paul shows them that his ministry to the Gentiles, at least in part, served to move to jealousy his fellow countrymen and save some of them (11:14). By magnifying his ministry, Paul meant that he worked hard to fulfill his ministry.

Even though Paul knew that God's sovereign purpose to save the Jews would be fulfilled, he didn't kick back and say, "What will be, will be." He knew that God fulfills His sovereign purpose through the means that He has appointed. That's why Paul wrote from prison to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:10), "For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory." In the same way, we should devote our time, energy, and money to take the gospel to the nations, because God has chosen some from every nation to come to faith in Christ.

4. We also should maintain a burden for our fellow countrymen to bring them to salvation.

Paul labored to take the gospel to the Gentiles who had never heard, but he still had a burden for his fellow Jews to know their Savior. While we should labor to take the gospel to the nations, we should never forget about our neighbors and contacts that we rub shoulders with each week. Make a list of those who are not saved whom you have frequent contact with and pray for their salvation.

5. The gospel message is nothing less than life from the dead.

Romans 11:15: "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will *their* acceptance be but life from the dead?" There are two ways to interpret that phrase, with solid commentators in both camps. If it is taken literally, it refers to the final resurrection of the dead at the second coming of Christ. Verse 26 supports this view, which says that just after the fullness of the Gentiles, all Israel will be saved and then Jesus will return. Also, verse

15 parallels verse 12, and in both verses the logic is that if the Jews' sin and rejection resulted in salvation for the Gentiles, then their reconciliation to God will result in even greater results. What could be greater than salvation, except the final resurrection that ushers in the eternal kingdom? (Douglas Moo and Thomas Schreiner argue for this view.)

While that view may well be correct, the phrase "life from the dead" is never used elsewhere to refer to the final resurrection. In Romans 6:13 Paul refers to our new position in Christ as being alive from the dead. Since unbelievers are dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1) and God through the gospel imparts new life, the phrase may have a figurative meaning. (John Murray and Leon Morris argue for this view.) When the Jews come to faith, it will be nothing less than Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones putting on flesh and coming to life (Ezekiel 37).

In a sense, both views are true. The gospel brings new life in Christ to everyone who believes. All who believe long for that glorious day when Christ returns and our mortal bodies are transformed into eternal bodies in conformity with Christ's body (1 Cor. 15). The fact that sinners are dead in their sins, alienated from God, should motivate us to commit ourselves to proclaim the gospel to all people, whether Jews or Gentiles.

Conclusion

We're not all called or gifted as evangelists. I'm not. But we are all called "according to God's purpose" (Rom. 8:28). His purpose is to be glorified as the good news about Jesus goes to all people. So whatever your spiritual gifts, don't spend your life pursuing your pleasure through the American dream. Spend your life for God's certain purpose for history. Commit yourself to work for His glory through taking the gospel to all people.

Application Questions

1. Some argue that if God elects some to salvation, it discourages evangelism. Why is the exact opposite the truth?
2. Why is it crucial to keep God's glory as our main purpose? What happens if we lose sight of this?
3. Discuss: The truth that human unbelief and sin cannot thwart God's purpose is both a comfort (Acts 4:27-28) and a danger (Rom. 3:8).
4. What are some practical ways that those of us who aren't gifted evangelists can devote ourselves to God's purpose to be glorified through taking the gospel to the nations?

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