

Ransom Captive Israel, Part 2

Advent Series

Romans 11:11-24

David Sunday

December 10, 2017

Romans 11:11-24. Hear the Word of the Lord:

¹¹ So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² 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. ²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

We're spending three weeks in this passage of Romans 11, in a series called "Ransom Captive Israel." This section reminds me of a new word that was added to the Oxford English Dictionary two years ago. It's actually an acronym: FOMO. It's a word that you wouldn't have known before the age of social media. FOMO means "fear of missing out." It refers to the anxiety

that there may be something interesting or exciting going on somewhere—and you’re missing it. It’s often aroused by posts seen on social media websites.

I wonder if you’ve ever experienced “fear of missing out.” Have you ever felt restless because you haven’t checked your phone in the last ten minutes, so maybe something’s happening and you don’t know about it? Or worse, you’ve left your phone at home and have to go a whole day missing out on what’s happening. Have you ever realized some of your friends got together and you weren’t invited—so you’ve got the FOMO blues?

FOMO describes a malady of our hyper-connected age, but it also describes a longing—a longing that a gospel-centered church should create in the hearts of those who do not yet know Jesus. Our lives should have the effect of creating fear of missing out in the hearts of those who don’t yet know our Savior. They should see such a beautiful expression of God’s grace and joy and peace in us that they want to have what we have.

If you ever look at a Christian and see something in his life because of his faith in Jesus, and you want to have it, the good news is that you can. God is willing to give you the same mercy, the same grace, the same joy, the same peace, the same love that any other believer in Jesus has if you too will get to know Jesus and put your trust in Him. No one needs to miss out on what God brought into the world through Jesus Christ. Jesus is a Savior for all people—for everyone: male, female, Jew, Gentile, Muslim, Hindu, Catholic, Protestant. It doesn’t matter what your background is, where you’ve come from, Jesus is a Savior for you and you don’t need to miss out on what God offers through Jesus Christ.

Today we’re going to look at two points from this middle section of Romans 11. First, I want to look at the effect the gospel in us believers should have on others who are not yet believers. Second, I want to consider the effect the gospel should have on believers.

The attractiveness of God’s grace in believers should provoke others to “fear of missing out” on the goodness of what we have in Christ (Romans 11:11-15).

As we look this section in Romans 11, you should be praying for our church—for our community of believers here—that the working of God’s Spirit in us would be so compelling, so beautiful, so attractive, that the effect of New Covenant Bible Church in this Fox Valley would be to provoke others to “fear of missing out”—to a holy kind of jealousy, wanting to have what we have—because that’s part of how God works.

There was a great preacher in Britain and America back in the 1700s by the name of George Whitefield. He preached to huge crowds of people without microphones. One of the people who went to hear him was a 17-year-old man who went specifically with the purpose of

mocking George Whitefield as he preached, plus mocking those who were listening to him. Afterwards, however, he wrote these words in his diary: “I went pitying those poor, despised Methodists, but I came away envying their happiness.” That envy of their happiness—that jealousy that was in his heart to have what they had—led him to faith in Jesus Christ and he himself became a preacher of the gospel.

So as last week’s message emphasized, we should never give up on anyone—even those who seem most hardened—because God is longsuffering and His grace is bigger than we think. What is going on in a person’s life right now is not the end of the story of God’s grace in that person’s life. Never give up on anyone. Paul is thinking a lot in these chapters about his fellow Jews. Paul the apostle was a Jewish man who for a long time rejected Christ as Messiah and persecuted those who followed Jesus. But then Jesus opened Paul’s eyes to realize that He is the Messiah and saved him.

Paul then became an apostle largely to Gentile people—people who were not Jews—because many of the Jewish people to whom Paul preached rejected the gospel of Jesus. They did not believe in the Messiah. But Paul has not given up hope for his fellow Jews. He believes the hardening of their hearts toward the gospel isn’t the end of the story. He believes that God’s mercy is so vast, so wide, that when the Jewish people by and large spurned God’s offer of salvation in Jesus, God just said, “I’m going to cast the net wider. I’m going to welcome in the Gentiles.” And then through that, Paul believes, more and more Jewish people are finally going to get saved and trust in Jesus as well.

In Romans 11:11-14, Paul describes how God’s grace overflows. He describes three stages of blessing and is going to repeat these three stages of blessing three times in the remainder of Romans 11—twice in our passage today, then once in our passage for next week in verses 25 and following. What are these three stages?

Stage one (verse 11): Israel, the Jewish people, stumble over the gospel. They don’t believe in Christ, which opens the door for the gospel to spread widely among the Gentiles. *“Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.”* The gospel made Israel want to have what the Gentiles now have in Christ.

Verse 12 describes stage three: *“Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure”—speaking of the Jews not believing the gospel—“means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!”* So just as Israel’s stumbling over the gospel brought the riches of God’s grace to the whole world, Paul is anticipating a day when there’s going to be a much fuller belief in the Messiah among the Jewish people and even greater blessings are going to come to the world. That’s stage three.

So what's stage two? What happens in between stages one and three? What's happening in this whole process? Verses 13-14 explain that as Jewish people see the gospel's success among the Gentiles, some of them will experience a "fear of missing out." They will see many of the Old Testament promises fulfilled in the Gentiles who believe in the gospel and will experience a good kind of jealousy that will make them want to have the riches the Gentiles are experiencing. Paul says, "That's part of my strategy for ministry." He says, "I'm speaking to you Gentiles because I'm an apostle to the Gentiles, but I'm doing this with an eye on my Jewish friends and kinsmen as well, *"in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them"* (verse 14).

Paul believes this is going to be happening even during his ministry in the first century. He believes some Jews are going to trust in Jesus and be saved. He is anticipating a time when there's going to be a much fuller trust in Jesus among the Jews. The main thing I think we should take away from this pattern that Paul is describing here is that God's grace always overflows boundaries.

Last week we heard this quote from Christopher Ash: "It's in the nature of grace that it never stops with us. It's the nature of grace that it's always reaching one group of people in order to reach another group of people." God didn't just save you for you. It never stops at any boundary, any border of culture. God is always wanting to reach more. So there's hope for the most hard-hearted. There's hope for the Jewish people.

Back in April 2012, CNN did an article entitled, "Jews reclaim Jesus as one of their own." My friend David Murray linked to this article on his blog and wrote these words: "Could this be the beginning of the long-awaited and eagerly-desired fulfillment of Romans 11? Let's pray so. Let's pray for this." The article quoted a young Orthodox Jew by the name of Benyamin Cohen, who spent a whole year going to Christian churches and then wrote a book called My Jesus Year.

In that book, Cohen wrote: "Jesus is a tangible icon that everybody can latch on to. Judaism doesn't have a superhero like that." He admitted he's jealous that Christians have Jesus. He said, "I'm not advocating for Moses dolls, but it's hard to believe in a God you can't see. I'm jealous of Christians in that regard. I wish we Jews living in the 21st century had something more tangible." Isn't that interesting? He's jealous for Jesus. He wishes he could experience and know Jesus as Christians do. Could that be the beginnings of something in Benyamin's spiritual journey toward Christ? When we read things like this, we should pray, "May it be so."

Acts 11:15 makes us pray for people like Benyamin. If the unbelief of Israel had such a wonderful effect on the world that the salvation message of the gospel is going to all the nations, Paul says, "*What will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?*" We can't be sure of what

Paul is referring to here. I think back to that vision Ezekiel the prophet had of the valley of dry bones, a whole graveyard full of deadness (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Then Ezekiel speaks forth the words of the Lord and prophecies over the bones and they all come to life—a great resurrection!

Paul could be referring in verse 15 to a day when there will be a worldwide great awakening that takes place when a massive number of Jewish people turn to Christ as their Messiah. Or he could be referring to the literal resurrection of the dead at the end of time, that when the full number of Jewish people turn to Christ as their Messiah and believe in Him at the end of time, it could signify that the end of the ages has come. Their belief in the Messiah could herald the coming of Christ and the bodily resurrection of all who've ever lived. Whatever Paul means here, he's anticipating something awesome, something glorious. It's a gloriously optimistic vision of the future.

Verse 16: *"If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches."* The dough could be referring to the faith of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Or it could be referring to the remnant of Jewish believers in Paul's day—people like Paul. They would be like the firstfruits of a far greater harvest yet to come. I think the way Tim Keller summarizes this is what we need to take away from these verses in terms of what these things mean: "The gospel faith of Jews such as Paul is a sign that there will one day be many more like him. Since God has brought in some of Israel, we can look to Him to bring in the whole."

We're going to explore that more next week when we get into the last section of this chapter, especially verse 25. That's a mystery that we need to discuss further. What I want us to be thinking about this week is the effect that the gospel in us should have on others. Is my life, is your life, making people jealous for Jesus? Are they seeing something in you—something in our church—that's making them want to have what we have? Is the Holy Spirit creating the kind of community here that if a devout Jew were to come into our midst, they would see that we are embodying what Israel in the Old Testament was supposed to be and they would want to be a part of this?

We should be praying that one of the effects of our lives would be to make people hungry for Jesus, even jealous for Him, so that they would long to have what we have. Paul says that is part of what God's doing in the world. He is using His people to make other people long for the faith and the experience and the presence of the Messiah in their lives.

That's verses 11-16: the effect the gospel in us should have on others. Now let's move to the second point this morning: the effect the gospel in us should have on ourselves.

The danger of being presumptuous should instill a healthy fear in believers, lest we too should miss out (verses 17-24).

Here Paul tells us there's a great danger of being presumptuous and taking grace for granted. We can think, "Hey, I deserve God's favor in my life." Paul is speaking mainly to Gentile believers in this section, which is what most of us are. He's telling us, "Remember your roots. Remember where you came from." Verse 17, "*But if some of the branches,*" that's the Jewish branches who didn't receive the Messiah, "*were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree...*"

In other words, you were just a weed—just a wild shoot. God took you, an unlikely candidate for His grace and salvation, and picked you out when you weren't even seeking Him. He found you and connected you to that nourishing branch, that olive tree, that branch of the faith of Abraham, who believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness (Romans 4:1-12). You thrive now on that life-giving sap of justification by faith in God alone. If that's how you got saved—if you were just a weed and God grafted you in to this tree so that now you're alive in Christ—the effect it should have on your life is humility, awe and wonder that God would choose you.

Therefore, "*Do not be arrogant toward the branches*" (verse 18). Do not look down on those who right now don't believe. Do not look down on Jewish people, for sure. Do not look down on anyone who's not saved. Remember why those Jewish branches were broken off? Verse 20 says, "*They were broken off because of their unbelief.*" He says you *only* "*stand fast through faith*"—through trusting what Jesus has done for you. That's how you're acceptable to God. It's only because Jesus lived the righteous life you failed to live, and because Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for your sin—it's only because of Jesus that you have any favor or any acceptance with God. It's not in you. It's only through Jesus that you've been taken into what you do not deserve, and you've been brought in where you do not belong. It's through Jesus—through faith in Him.

Verse 20: "*So do not become proud, but stand in awe.*" There should be a healthy fear in us who believe, lest we too should miss out if we do not continue trusting in Jesus in faith in Him. I want you to listen carefully as I read through verse 22:

²⁰ So do not become proud, but stand in awe. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² 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.

Those are hard words. Paul is saying there is a healthy fear of God that exists in the heart of every true believer and this fear of God is part of what He uses to keep us persevering in faith and trust in Jesus Christ. True believers don't get presumptuous. We don't "get used to" God's grace and think, "Oh, I've got this. I deserve this. I'm in. No worries." We always stand in awe of what God has done for us in Christ. Day by day by day we continue in His kindness. We continue saying, "God, I don't deserve this. It's amazing grace that saves me. It has nothing to do with me. I need a Savior. I need You day by day by day."

A person who is trusting in God, who has faith in God, has this healthy fear. It's not a fear of losing your salvation. Paul is not suggesting that anyone who has truly been saved by God can lose that salvation. Those whom God saves He saves forever and keeps them forever. But the Bible does say that there are some who think they are saved, who in the end prove they are not. One of the proofs of the reality of our salvation is that we continue in faith. We continue in His kindness. Things like pride, arrogance, complacency, self-confidence, boastfulness and self-righteousness are not the way we receive Christ. That's not the way of faith.

God is very severe toward those who try to establish their own righteousness apart from faith in Christ. There is a severity from God for those who say, "I'm good enough. I'm moral enough. I can do it my way.". But God is kind to those who say, "Jesus, I trust in You and You alone." Paul is saying in verse 22, "Behold both of these character qualities of God—both His kindness and His severity." Don't think of God as only kind, only loving, only accepting, only merciful. But also, don't think of God as only severe or only just or only holy. Realize He's both. He's kind and He's severe.

By beholding His severity, we are able to continue in His kindness. The purpose of beholding God's severity is to say, "O God, thank You for Your kindness to me in Christ. I want to stay there. I want to keep trusting in Him." True believers fear anything that would come into their lives that would keep them from trusting in Christ alone. True believers fight daily against sin and daily digs out the roots of unbelief that can take hold on our hearts. We daily feed on God's kindness toward us, which is meant to lead us toward repentance. We do that through reading the Word, prayer, worship and fellowship with other believers, where we recognize again and again, "The gospel is for me. I don't deserve this. I need God's grace afresh daily."

For believers in Jesus, there's something very sweet and satisfying about fearing God. We realize that threat of hell, judgment and condemnation over our lives has been removed by Christ. We're not dreading that God is going to send us to hell. But that does not cause us to fear God less. It takes away the dread of God, but it adds sweetness and depth and a humble trembling before the Lord—a joyful awe of God. That's something that should be present in every

believer's life. If we don't have it, we should be asking, "Have I become presumptuous? Am I taking God's grace for granted?"

I heard John Piper saying there's a reason we like to go to movies that have terrifying scenes, or go to amusement parks and take a bungee jump. I don't like that, but some people like to do that. There's a reason we like to do those things, but we would never actually want to be in the terrifying scene in the movie, nor would we want to open the door of an airplane and just jump out of it without a parachute. He compared this to the fear of God in a believer's life. John Piper said:

"The reason we like to do those thrilling things—go to movies and jump with bungee ropes—is because we know in reality we're safe... We were made to be safely afraid of God, because when we are safely afraid of God—when there is no condemnation and we know that He is our Father and our Friend—then what remains in fear of God is deeply pleasant."

He said the reason we believers fear God is that we were created "to be safely afraid of God. "We know His condemnation and wrath have been removed, so we're safe in Him. Yet we were created to be safely afraid of God. Everything else is an echo of this truth.

It's a holy, trembling awe of the one Who, in His kindness, rescued us from His severity and Who keeps us in His kindness. It's deeply sweet and satisfying for a believer in God to tremble with fear before Him, with amazement at what He has done for us in Christ. So don't be arrogant if God has saved you and don't despair if He has not yet saved you and you want to be saved. Don't despair if you're seeing what God is doing in the world through Jesus. He sent His Son to be your Savior and you want that salvation. Don't despair. God is able and willing to save you, to graft you in to the tree of life that brings salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

But don't be presumptuous. I think all of us should be asking the question right now: how can I get in? How can I be sure I don't miss out on God's grace, on what God has done in Christ? How do I get right with God? I heard someone say that every religion—no matter what background you have, whether it's some type of Christianity or some other religion—every religion answers that question with a word that starts with these three letters: MER. It's the last two letters that determine whether you're trusting in Christ or not.

MER. Most religions say the way to get right with God is you add IT on to the end of MER: MERIT. Most religions say you get right with God by doing something that shows you're worthy, that you deserve it. You pray a lot. You give a lot. You give to charity. You live a moral life. That's how you get right with God. It's through merit. So when you get to heaven and someone asks you, "Why are you here?" you say, "Well, I was very sacrificial with my money."

Or, “I went to church every Sunday.” Or, “I went to the mosque. That’s how I got right with God.” “I’ve prayed. I’ve cleansed myself. I’ve lived a pure and holy life. I’ve made sacrifices for my sin.” That’s merit. The Bible says no one ever gets right with God by MERIT.

The only way anyone ever gets right with God is through MERCY. None of us deserves to be saved by God. None of us deserves to be accepted by Him. “All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and the only way anyone gets right with Him is through His mercy. If you, like so many of us who live in this Fox Valley, are a high performing person who does well in work, who’s well-educated, who’s doing fairly well financially, who lives a respectable life—it’s very humbling to come to the point where you say before God, “Actually, I’m a failure. I can’t get right with You, God. I am desperate. I am lost. I am a sinner. I am guilty. I need Your mercy. O God, be merciful to me.”

The good news is that whoever comes to God for mercy will never miss out on the riches of what God has done for sinners through Christ. The good news is when you come to God for mercy, you find a God with arms that are wide open and a heart that is beating warm with love for you, ready to receive you, ready to show mercy to you.

I want you to hear the story of someone who has recently received mercy from God, someone who’s actually attended our church for a long time, who recently came to realize, “I need mercy. I have no merit of my own to be acceptable to God.” I want you to hear his story. It’s my prayer that his story will become the story of many others who attend our church. So listen to Patrick Whitchurch tell us what God has done for him lately and how he experienced His mercy.

Patrick: Let me start with a verse at the end of Romans 10, where God says, “*All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.*” I’ve known a lot of you for a long time. A lot of you know I grew up in church. From the time I was a baby, my parents took me there every Sunday, along with my brother and sister. When I was about nine, I thought I had accepted Jesus as my Savior and I trusted in that thought for a long time.

At the same time, for as long as I can remember, I’d been very driven by the opinion of others and I really sought to have others think well of me. I really lived for that good opinion of others. That shaped how I thought. It shaped what I did. It shaped how I spoke. In many parts of life, that was successful. At work and with acquaintances, I could appear to be someone who had things together, who did well.

But at the same time, I kept myself from getting too close to people. I guarded myself due to the fear of being rejected and hurt. Again, that works fine in those distant relationships, but not in close relationships. Melissa and I have been married for 20 years and the effect living that

way has had on my wife has been terrible. She shared with me periodically over time how that had hurt. I'd have times when I would try to change for a while. I would try to do better. But still I was trusting in myself. As soon as things seemed comfortable again, I would fall back into the same patterns.

A couple weeks ago she shared with me again the effect that had on her. I came to church two weeks ago wrestling with that and thinking, "What can I do? What do I need to change?" That morning David preached on Romans 10, where it talks about the obstacles in the church that keep people from the gospel. He talked first about having a misguided zeal, trusting in things other than Jesus. Romans 10:3 says, "*For being ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*" I saw clearly that I had been seeking to establish my own righteousness. I had been trusting in myself.

As I heard more and more, seeing how that had been my life, the thought became very clear in my head, "I am lost. I've been loving myself above my wife, above my kids, above others and ultimately above Jesus." David went on preaching in Romans 10, speaking of how we overcomplicate the gospel and that it's really very simple. It says, "*The word is near you.*" I had heard the gospel literally thousands of times throughout my life, in church, in talking with people, in books. I had even had times of speaking the truth of the gospel—but I had never come to the point where I had really given up trusting in myself, or given up thinking I was good in myself, and acknowledging that I needed Jesus.

Then Romans 10:9 says, "*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*" As we read that verse that morning, oh, how I wanted to trust and have that salvation—to be saved. I continued throughout the rest of that sermon with an inward struggle. As I look back, I had had times in the past when I would hear the gospel and I would think, "I don't really believe this." But I'd been kept back from admitting that, not wanting to admit it to others, not wanting others to see that I had failed to trust in Jesus. That was my pride.

But that morning the Lord broke through that. Afterward the service I talked with David, and through tears I prayed, telling the Lord how much I wanted to be His, to trust in Him. Melissa had stayed home that morning with our son, so that afternoon I told her what the Lord had done. The forgiveness she had for me was incredible. I stand here now as one who is saved. I have trusted in Jesus.

Going back to Romans 10:21, I can see that for 40+ years God had held out His hands to me—to this disobedient and contrary person—and He saved me. I am very grateful I get to share that with everyone today.

David: I believe there are many more like Patrick—God is holding out His hands to you. Don't let fear of what people think of you or the pride that makes you think, "Oh, I am good enough," keep you from humbling yourself and saying, "Oh, God, be merciful to me." May what God did in Patrick's life be a breakthrough in the lives of many people in our church.

Let's pray.

God, You are a merciful God, mighty to save, so willing to rescue. We rejoice in what You're doing in Patrick's life, in Melissa's life and in their family. We pray that as a body of believers, we would come around them, encourage them and help them. But Lord, thank You so much for the way this opens our hearts and makes us realize how much we need You; how much we need to be honest before You and before one another about our need.

Lord, I pray that no fear of human approval or what people will think would keep anyone today from coming to the same realization You brought to Patrick two weeks ago. I pray for anyone today who's hearing the gospel for the first time, that You would give understanding, that You would be creating a hunger and desire in their hearts for Jesus.

Lord Jesus, I pray for all of us who've heard many, many times—may we never become presumptuous in where we are. Bring us to repentance. May we tremble in awe at what You have done for us.

As we look forward to Your return, Lord Jesus, we pray that You would find us a people who are humbled with amazement at Your saving grace and mercy, for we do not deserve it. You have been so kind to us, Lord. We rejoice in You and in what You're able to do even today. We ask that You would continue this work in us and in our church family, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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