

## Ransom Captive Israel

### Advent Series, Part 1

Romans 11:1-10

David Sunday

December 3, 2017

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I believe the Apostle Paul would have loved the Advent song, “O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” In Romans 9-11, he has been sorrowing over his fellow Jews whose hearts are captive to unbelief. Their hearts are spiritually insensitive to their need and to God’s provision of salvation by grace through faith alone. Paul has been sharing his burden for all the nations and for his fellow Jews in these chapters.

We’ve heard him praying for them. We’ve heard of his great sorrow and unceasing anguish for them. We’ve heard him say in Romans 10:1, “*Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.*” Paul is sorrowful over their unbelief, but he is not in despair. He believes that where sin increases, grace abounds all the more (Romans 5:20). He believes in the overflowing, abounding grace of God—a grace that reaches across cultural, ethnic, racial and national boundaries. No pride or stubbornness of man can stop the overflow of God’s grace.

So through Paul’s example, we are exhorted to keep on praying for and preaching the gospel to those who don’t yet believe. Let’s pick up where we left off last week with Romans 10:14-15:

*But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed?  
And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?  
And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how  
are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How  
beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!”*

We see from Paul’s example here that we should never give up on anyone. Today, I want you to have in mind someone in your life who right now seems very, very unlikely to ever come to faith in Jesus Christ. On the spectrum reaching from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of light, this person is way over on the darkness end. It seems like it would take a miracle to move them one step closer to Jesus. But God is a God of miracles. He’s a God of sovereign grace. I

want you to keep this person in mind as you listen to this message. I'm going to give you three reasons why we should never give up on anyone.

**Never give up on anyone—because God is longsuffering.**

Look first at Romans 10:20-21 where Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah, who is so bold as to say, *"I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me."* The grace of God is flowing out to all the nations of the earth. He is being found by people who did not even seek Him. He's a God on the move. He's a God bringing salvation to the nations. *"But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'"*

The image of a God with outstretched arms is very evocative to me. Picture a father waiting for his prodigal son to come home, arms open wide. Picture a shepherd going out in search of his lost sheep, arms open wide to gather that sheep to his bosom. Picture a valiant warrior storming through the enemy's battalions on a rescue mission to save the lost. This is our God. This is our Savior and King.

Back in the fourth century, Athanasius wrote a beautiful and memorable description of how Jesus broke down the wall of partition that divided the Jews from the Gentiles when Jesus died on the cross:

How could He have called us if He had not been crucified, for it is only on the cross that a man dies with arms outstretched? Here again, we see the fitness of His death and of those outstretched arms: it was that He might draw His ancient people with the one and the Gentiles with the other, and join both together in Himself.

I know that's a bit allegorical, but I find that picture beautiful and attractive. It induces worship in me, as I picture Jesus' outstretched arms, His bleeding hands nailed to the cross. With one bleeding hand He is calling His Jewish people back to Himself; then with the other bleeding hand He's calling His Gentile flock. He's dying for people from all nations, so we might be united with Him in His death and also share in His resurrection glory.

So as you think about God's longsuffering patience, here's what you have to settle in your mind. Whenever we grapple with these doctrines of God's sovereign grace—the mysteries of election, who gets saved and who doesn't and how God's eternal purposes are at work in all of this—we have to be persuaded that no one is more longsuffering, more patient, more willing to save sinners than God is. Whatever mercy is in us, it's miniscule compared to the mercy in God. He is willing to save whomever calls upon the name of the Lord, as we saw in Romans 10:13:

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling  
Calling for you and for me  
See on the portals He's waiting and watching  
Watching for you and for me

Why should we tarry when Jesus is calling  
Pleading for you and for me?  
Why should we linger and heed not His mercies  
Mercies for you and for me?

O, for the wonderful love He has promised  
Promised for you and for me  
Though we have sinned, He has mercy and pardon  
Pardon for you and for me

Come home, come home  
You who are weary, come home  
Earnestly, tenderly Jesus is calling  
Calling, O sinner, come home

[Softly and Tenderly by Will L. Thompson]

He is full of longsuffering, patience and mercy which should encourage us never to give up on anyone. But what if people you know are refusing to heed God's tender mercies? What if it seems like no one around you is getting saved? What if Paul's fellow Jews refuse to come back into the arms of God's welcome? What if they turn their backs forever? Can God fulfill the promises He made to Abraham back in Genesis 12 and 15? If the physical descendants of Abraham refuse to respond to God's mercy, has God rejected His ancient people Israel? That's the question with which Paul opens chapter 11—and his answer is, "*By no means!*" It's an answer that encourages us never to give up on people—why? Because of God's longsuffering mercy.

**Never give up on anyone—because God's grace is bigger than you think.**

The second reason we should never give up on anyone is found in Romans 11:1-6. Hear God's Word:

*I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? <sup>3</sup> "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my*

*life.”<sup>4</sup> But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”<sup>5</sup> So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.<sup>6</sup> But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*

Paul is giving four pieces of evidence to prove God has not rejected His ancient people Israel. John Stott describes these as the personal evidence, the theological evidence, the biblical evidence and the contemporary evidence.

Paul starts with the personal evidence. He says, “Look at me. You want evidence that God has not rejected His people? I am Exhibit A. I myself am an Israelite. I’m a descendent of Abraham. I’m from the tribe of Benjamin, that little tribe in the southern kingdom of Judah. But God saved me and He’s using me to preach the gospel of Christ. God didn’t do it because I deserved it. God didn’t save me because I was most likely to succeed in His Kingdom. I had with all my strength contended against God.”

As Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:13, “*I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.*” And the key phrase, in verse 14, is this: “*And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*” Paul believes in the God of overflowing grace. He continues:

*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*

Jesus displayed “*perfect patience.*” There it is again—the longsuffering of God. Paul says, “Look at me. God saved me, so He hasn’t rejected His people.”

The second piece of evidence is theological. We see this at the beginning of Romans 11:2, “*God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.*” God has a people He has foreknown. He has set His love upon them since before the foundation of the world. These are a people He has determined to save for Himself. Paul, a Jew, is part of these people. Just as Saul the persecutor becoming Paul the apostle is a great surprise, God has many other surprises up His sleeve, so to speak. In His sovereign plan, He has many surprises of amazing grace, people He has chosen to save who at present seem full of hostility toward the gospel—including some Jews. So never give up on anyone.

As we read in Romans 8:29-30, *“Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...and those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”* God has a plan—a vast and magnificent plan—to save many people.

Then there’s the biblical evidence. Paul goes to the story line of Scripture. Remember Elijah in the northern kingdom of Israel, when multitudes of people were turning away from the Lord and worshiping idols and false gods? Remember that great confrontation Elijah had with the prophets of Baal and how the Lord showed Himself to be the true God, destroying all those prophets? He is a great God and the great King over all the earth. But then right after Elijah had that wonderful mountain-top experience, do you remember what happened? He was fleeing from the wicked Queen Jezebel who wanted to take his life. As he was running away, he cried out to God, “Lord, this is awful. They’ve killed Your prophets. They’ve torn down Your altars. I’m the only one left!”

Do you ever feel that way? “I’m the only one around here who loves You, God. I’m the only one left—and they’re trying to kill me too.” Do you remember God’s answer to Elijah? “O Elijah, you’re not the only one left. I have been preserving a remnant— people called out—who belong to Me. I’ve been making sure there are people left who will worship Me, who will carry on My purposes and plans. In fact, I have kept for Myself 7,000 people in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal. There are more than you realize, Elijah. My work is going forward. I’ve chosen people to be saved. I’ve preserved them in the midst of evil and I’m doing it for My glory. So I have not rejected My people.”

Finally, there’s the contemporary evidence. Paul says in verse five, *“So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.”* Paul knows it might not feel that way right now. You might look around and feel like believers are very few. But he’s reminding the Romans that there has always been a spiritual Israel within ethnic Israel. The number of that spiritual Israel may be bigger than we realize. I mean, just look at the book of Acts and you’ll see that Paul would often go and start his ministry in the Jewish synagogue, as was his pattern, and then some would believe and others would reject. Then he’d move on to the Gentiles.

A lot of Jewish people in the book of Acts did reject the gospel, but remember, a lot also believed. Do you remember in the early chapters of Acts that thousands were coming to faith in Christ as their Messiah? Listen to this example from Acts 6:7: *“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”* So there is a remnant chosen by grace. But it’s all

by grace, not by works. As Paul says in Romans 11:6, *“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”*

But it can feel for us in the 21st century like we’re really becoming a shrinking minority. We can get this “woe is me” mentality. “I’m the only one left.” Maybe you’re the only one in your family or in your workplace or in your school or in your neighborhood that you’re aware of who loves Jesus. We can certainly see that the tide has shifted in our culture. This is no longer a comfortable incubator for serious Christians. But the fact that American culture is less friendly toward Christianity than it used to be isn’t necessarily bad news for the gospel.

I like how the Southern novelist Walker Percy viewed this. He said a lot of what passes for cultural Christianity isn’t really Christian at all. He argued that the collapse of political power and the outward display of “Christendom” was not a catastrophe. Rather, here is what he said:

The good news is that in becoming the minority in all countries—a remnant—the Church also becomes a world church in the true sense, bound to no culture, not even to the West of the old Christendom, by no means triumphant, but rather a pilgrim church witnessing to a world in travail and yet a world to which it will appear ever stranger and more outlandish.

We are pilgrims, yet our minority status does not mean the gospel is being defeated. The flourishing of the church in America doesn’t depend on who the state of Alabama elects to the U.S. Senate on December 12. We do not flourish because we gain a political majority. We are not confident that the church will never perish because we are able to instill Christian morals on a culture that doesn’t want them. We are not confident because the number of Christians outnumbers the number of non-Christians.

We are confident that God will preserve His church as a remnant in this world because we know that God in His grace has chosen a people for Himself, and God’s grace will never fail. We know that salvation is by grace alone, not by works. We know that God is a God of overflowing grace, so we need to open our eyes and realize that the boundaries of the horizons of God’s grace might be much bigger than we can even see. In Romans 11:1-6, Paul is reminding us that God has not rejected His people. He’s showing His grace as He promised, and He’s doing it in amazing ways. All you have to do is look at your own life and you would agree with this anonymous hymn writer:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;  
It was not I that found, O Savior true,  
No, I was found of Thee.

Thou didst reach forth Thy hand and mine enfold;  
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea,  
'Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold,  
As Thou, dear Lord, on me.

Lord, You're the One Who saved me. You're the One Who called me. You're the One Who loved me before I even knew You. You're the One Who saved me from before the foundation of the world. That's evidence that God has not forgotten His promise to save a people for Himself. His grace is bigger than you think. If God can save you, if God can save Paul, if God can preserve a remnant of 7,000 in Elijah's day, should you not be praying and hoping and never giving up on the hardened people in your life? By all means, don't give up.

**But remember, God does harden in sin those who turn against Him.**

Before we go on to the third reason why we should never give up, we do need to pause and think a little about this whole condition of spiritual hardness, the sobering reality that hearts can become hardened toward God and His grace. In Romans 11:7-10, Paul is calling us to remember that God does harden in sin those who turn against Him:

<sup>7</sup> *What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, <sup>8</sup> as it is written,  
"God gave them a spirit of stupor,  
eyes that would not see  
and ears that would not hear,  
down to this very day."*

<sup>9</sup> *And David says,  
"Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;  
<sup>10</sup> let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and bend their backs forever."*

These are stunning and difficult verses to read, aren't they? I want to remind you, I did not write these verses. Paul did, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God doesn't give us verses like these so we can skip over them or try to explain them away. He gives us hard verses like these so we will grapple with realities we would otherwise ignore, so we would understand something about the nature of sin and judgment and more deeply appreciate His grace.

So what's going on in these verses? Well, there's Israel, then there is the elect within Israel. It seems that the majority of Jews in Paul's day—just like many religious people in our day and probably a number of people in our own church—they're striving very earnestly to try to

obtain righteousness, but they're pursuing it in the wrong way. Look back at Romans 9:31-32: *"Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works."* Or look at Romans 10:3: *"For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."*

So they're saying, "O God, I want very much to be acceptable to You. But I want to do this on my own. I believe I can achieve this somehow. If I try really hard, I can be good enough for You, God." And God responds, "Oh, but you need a sacrifice for your sin. You cannot pay for your sin. Blood needs to be shed for your sin. You need to trust in the provision of grace and mercy through the sacrifice of blood." It's a sacrifice we see ultimately in Jesus, the Messiah. But the Jews say, "Oh, no. I'm not that bad that I need God's Son to die for me. Oh, no. I can do this. I'm good enough."

When we have that in our hearts—this effort to establish our own righteousness, being driven by a desire to be good enough, even proud that we're able to be acceptable to God—we become resistant, even allergic, to God's grace. A hardening sets in. We hear things like, "God would be willing to save a murderer if he will repent and believe in Jesus. But an outwardly moral person—who refuses to repent and believe in Jesus—that person will go to hell." Then our response is, "No way! That's offensive." We're offended by the gospel of grace. Our hearts want to be proud in ourselves, so we become hardened.

When we have that hardening and resistance in our hearts, over time God is able in His justice to confirm us in that hardness. He hardens the hearts of unbelievers who will not receive His grace. Notice in these verses that it's God Who does the hardening—but it's not God Who created the hardness. God judicially, like a judge, gives people over to their own desires. Remember the quote from Tim Keller we mentioned a couple weeks ago: "When God hardens someone, He doesn't create the hardness; He simply allows the person to go his or her own way. God hardens those He wants to harden. And all those whom He hardens want to be hardened."

So here Paul quotes from three portions of the Old Testament: from Moses, the great Jewish lawgiver; from Isaiah, the great Jewish prophet; and from David, the great Jewish king. All of these prophesied that God would harden His people when they turned against Him in sin. God would send them into a spiritual coma so that their eyes couldn't see and their ears couldn't hear, this being a retribution—a punishment—that perfectly fits the crime. They had a proud and self-righteous spirit, therefore God gave them over to a hardened and unbelieving heart.

These are hard words, but they're necessary for us to understand why so many people reject the gospel. There are two sobering reminders for us in these verses.

1. Judgment is coming. Hell is real. Don't trifle with it.
2. Beware of rejecting the things of God. Don't think, "I can put that off for another time. I can wait until I'm a little older. I can deal with that in the future." Don't do that with God. *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts"* (Hebrews 4:7).

Today is the only opportunity you have, as God is speaking to you. Will you open your heart? Will you let your heart be softened? Or will you harden your heart to Him? If you harden your heart today, you may find 40 years later that your heart is as hard as cement and you won't even want to return to God. That's the sobering reality.

Think about this too, not just individually, but think about what this could mean for a church. Nothing is more nauseating than cold, formal, dead religion. When a church starts slipping into a spiritual coma—when we're sleepy, dull, bored, boring and we're not responsive to the needs of the community that is lost and dying and going to hell, when there's decay and dormancy in our spiritual vitality—these things are a wake-up call. We need to pray, "O God, revive Your church in our day. Stir us up afresh. Don't let us fall into a spiritual slumber. Let us be awake and enlivened. Let us see the glories of the gospel afresh. We don't want our hearts to become hardened. Revive us, Lord."

**Never give up on anyone—because what you see now is not the end of the story of God's overflowing grace.**

It's always been the case that within the professing people of God there are those whose hearts would be hardened. It was prophesied by Moses, by David, by Isaiah. But still, we should never give up on anyone. Why? Reason number four: never give up on anyone, because what you see now is not the end of the story of God's overflowing grace. We're going to come back to Romans 11:11 and following next week to look more specifically at the Jewish people and their future in God's plans. But I don't want to stop at verse ten today and leave us on a really heavy note. I want to leave you on a hope-filled note, so I want you to see through this chapter that the present unbelief of many Jews was not, in Paul's mind, the end of the story. And the present unbelief of many people in our lives isn't the end of the story either. Who are you thinking about right now? Who's on your heart? Whom are you praying for, that they would move a step closer to Christ, from the domain of darkness into the Kingdom of light? Whom are you asking God to

help you—as a minister and ambassador of grace—to move them in that direction? No matter how hard they look right now, know that the story is not over. Don't give up.

Let verses 11-15 whet your appetite and kindle your imagination. As I read these verses, I want you to be thinking, “What could Paul possibly have in mind here?” I've been doing this all week, as I've been looking at Romans 11. I've been thinking, “Paul, what do you have in mind here? I'm fascinated by this, but I want to know what this means.” I'm going to give you another week now and I want you to be thinking, “Paul, what do you have in mind here? What are you talking about?” Let's read Romans 11:11-15:

*<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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! <sup>13</sup> Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry <sup>14</sup> in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.*

In other words, Paul is believing that through his ministry, God's going to be doing some amazing things in the hearts of some people who look very hardened right now. Then look at this last verse: “*For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?*” Just imagine with me that because of their sin, Israel is hardened—but through their hardening, many Gentiles are being brought into the church. We see that happening throughout the book of Acts. But the story doesn't stop there.

No, in the words of Christopher Ash, “It's in the nature of grace that it never stops with us. It never stops at any boundary, any border of culture. It's the nature of grace that it's always reaching one group of people in order to reach another group of people.” God's grace reached you in order to reach more through you.

So as the Jewish people see Gentile Christians whose lives are beautified by the grace of God, and they see the character and godliness that's at work in them, Paul is saying this can have a persuasive, heart-melting, heart-softening effect on the hearts of those who are hardened, making them say, “Oh, I want what they have.” And they're being drawn in through what God is going over here. That's what Paul is envisioning.

So when you see a hardened person in your life, never give up. Don't give up on the hard people in your family. Don't give up on the hard people in your workplace. Do you remember how you used to pray for them? Do you remember how you wept over their hardness of heart? Do you remember how you looked for every opportunity you could find to say something about

Jesus to bring them one step closer? Do you remember how you used to feel burdened for their salvation? Have you gotten used to the hardness of heart that's in them? Have you started to think, "That's just the way they are, that's just the way this neighborhood is, that's just the way these people at work are? They're never going to change. It would take a miracle for them to get saved." Well, isn't that what salvation is? When we think like that, we forget it's all by God's grace, and the boundaries of God's grace are much wider and deeper than we imagine.

Let me tell you a story about God's amazing grace. It's a story of someone in Kate's and my life, a woman to whom we are very close. We've known her for a long time and for many years she was very hardened toward the gospel of Jesus. She's lived a hard life. She's been rejected by those who should have cared for her. She's struggled with addictions. She's been relationally abandoned, economically impoverished, mentally tormented. But she is someone we love dearly and she loves us.

I remember there was a time when it was next to impossible to talk to her about the gospel. She was definitely someone who had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. She was seeking to establish her own righteousness. She would not submit to the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus. She felt that she was a good person. She took a lot of confidence in the fact that her grandfather was a Congregational minister and that she had lived, as a young girl, in the manse of the church.

I remember one time we were trying to talk to her about Christ and Kate asked her, "What if you were to die tonight and face God, Who then says to you, 'Why should I let you into My Kingdom?'" [It's that old Evangelism Explosion question.] "What would you tell God?" This lady said brazenly, "I'd tell Him I gave it my best shot and that had better be good enough." This hardness of heart went on for years.

But then about eight years ago some people from a little Baptist church met her. They started bringing her meals, showing her love. She doesn't drive, so they took her to the grocery store. They drove her around Fort Wayne, where she lives. These people took a genuine interest in her as a person. They loved her and spent time with her; they shared the truth of the gospel with her. One of the deacons of that church gave her a ride from Fort Wayne to Elgin back in March of 2010 to visit Kate when she was undergoing chemotherapy. She really wanted to come and see us at that time—because the woman I'm talking about is Kate's mother.

During that visit, Kate reminded her mom of that conversation from many years earlier, when she told Kate, "I'd tell God I gave it my best shot." Kate told her mom, "As I've been facing the reality of cancer, I've had to think long and hard about what I'd say to God when I stand before Him." Kate told her that her confidence was not in her own righteousness—not because of

her own works—but because of what Jesus did for her on the cross. Through faith in Him, she now has a righteousness from God.

This was the first time we'd ever seen Kate's mom listen to the gospel and not have an immediate answer. In the years that followed, the ministry of that little Baptist church in Fort Wayne has had a softening effect. She's moved baby-step by baby-step from darkness to being closer to light, as she's seen the love, joy, peace and kindness of God's people. And we have reason to believe that at some point in these last eight years, Kate's mom went from the domain of darkness into the Kingdom of God's Son, where there's light.

This past July, we had a wonderful visit with Kate's mom in Fort Wayne. She talked to us voluntarily about reading the Bible. She took us around her apartment to show us picture frames where she had taken church bulletin covers of Scriptures she wanted to memorize. She's framed them and put them around her apartment. If you would have told us 20 years ago that Kate's mom would be talking about memorizing the Bible, we would have thought, "Is that even possible?"

Never give up on anyone, friends, because God is long-suffering. God's grace is bigger than you think. So never give up, even with those who seem very hardened, because what you see now is not the end of the story. You never know what surprises God in His grace might have in store for the people in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in your family—because this is the kind of God He is.

*"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things,"* including the salvation of very hardened people. So, *"To him be glory forever. Amen"* (Romans 11:33-36).

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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