

*Romans 11, Pt. 1*

People really do come to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Conversion happens. We sometimes mope around as if God wasn't interested in changing people anymore. But that's not true. The back page of *Christianity Today* magazine always contains the story of a conversion to the Christian faith. A former Boston Red Sox player went from a crucial World Series home run to a life marked by drug addiction and broken marriages. He found Christ, freedom from drugs, and healing in his relationships. A girl growing up in a culturally Buddhist home in Colorado had a friend become a Christian. The girl tried it out but struggled to connect with God. Her dad moved the family to Hong Kong, and in her despair the girl promised God full commitment if he would provide her Christian friends and a youth group to attend. He did, and she has never looked back. A young boy was raised in the Nation of Islam, but God in his providence drew him step by step to Jesus and then into pastoral ministry. He now runs an apologetics ministry aimed at an urban audience. We might add to such stories the reality that **people are coming to know Jesus all over the world** - in China, Ecuador, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria. The church is not in retreat because our God is not in retreat.

Why do we lose hope concerning conversion and changed lives? In part, we fit our expectations to the decline that we see in our established churches. It is undoubtedly the case for both our beloved congregation and other congregations in Hillsdale that the numbers are not what they once were. We can then turn to the Census data and discover that most people living in our county do not report any religious identity. On top of these things, we hear and read opinions of people both in and outside of the church discussing the problems of the church. And so, we begin to doubt. There are spots open in the parking lot, our culture has clearly embraced unbiblical moral standards, and no one seems to be able to do anything about it. We hunker down. We love our Christian friends, we pray and read the Bible, we focus on how God is taking care of our emotional needs and personally guiding us. And that is about all that we expect. I have been discouraged by the lack of interest I find in some

people for the faith. Consequently, I think that maybe I should focus my energies inward to the fellowship of the church. What's the point of outreach?

**Romans 11 won't let us settle in this place of agnosticism regarding conversion to Jesus.** We ended the tenth chapter with the thought that God is persistent in extending his mercy to Jews and Gentiles alike. And in the eleventh chapter, we note two basic ideas. First, **people are becoming Christians**; there are Jewish people who now compose the faithful remnant of Israel, and there are Gentiles who are like wild branches grafted into the holy tree. Second, **God has big plans for the future**; there will be a continued ingathering of Jewish people into the church before the end. We will discuss what is happening in the present this week. We will talk about what will happen in the future next week.

**The Remnant of Israel.** Paul begins the chapter by speaking of the fact that even in his day there is a remnant of faithful Israel. He himself is an example of a Jewish person who had come to believe in Jesus. As sociologist and historian Rodney Stark has argued, the Christian mission to the Jews was more successful than we sometimes think, and conversion probably continued well into the fourth or fifth centuries. The New Testament is full of Jewish believers who found their identity and hope in Jesus Christ. So, as Paul asks in v. 1, has God abandoned his people? Absolutely not. His people were coming to believe in Jesus, even though many still resisted and even opposed the young church. **There was a remnant of faithful Israel**, even as there had been a remnant in the northern kingdom of Israel during the ministry of the prophet Elijah. Elijah confronted during the days of Ahab and Jezebel a deep-seated idolatry and unbelief among the people. But when Elijah was at a moment of despair, feeling that he was the last faithful person on earth, God assured him that there were seven thousand men who had not bowed the knee to Baal. We know from reading the Old Testament that the battle with unbelief was a persistent theme. God always, even in times of great darkness, had a remnant among the people even as many were hardened in their faithlessness. But human darkness cannot overcome God's light. God still had his remnant, those Jewish people who were coming to believe in the good news of Jesus.

It is interesting to reflect at this point on the despair we sometimes feel when we look at the church in America. If we look to the left, it seems as if whole

denominations are committed to the full normalization of sexual immorality and captive to prevailing political ideologies. If we look to the right, we see churches and groups who have abandoned orthodoxy for therapeutic sermons, the idolatry of individual personalities, and an inability to speak against injustice. And we despair. We chug along with our confession of faith, our Reformed view of worship, and our teaching on sin and repentance, and we wonder, “Where are the witnesses? Where are the upholders of truth?” But God still has his people. **All over the world, God has faithful men and women.** In the mainline churches, God has shining lights. In the shallow end of the theological pool, God has passionate followers. Even if things feel dark, we never need despair. Paul knew there was a remnant. And, as we will see next week, he believed that some who were in the hardened camp would come to believe in Jesus as the gospel continued to be preached.

**The Wild Branches.** In verse eleven, Paul turns his attention to the Gentiles. He develops the image of an olive tree. There is one tree. Over time, natural branches were broken off, and wild branches were grafted in. The tree represents the one people of God through history. The natural branches broken off are the hardened portions of Israel. The wild branches grafted in are the Gentiles who have come to believe in Jesus. We are reminded here of Jesus’s words in John’s gospel: **“I am the vine, you are the branches.** He who remains in me and I in him bears much fruit. For without me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5). Israel was sometimes compared to a vine in the Old Testament. But all along, Jesus was the true vine. The faithful of the Old Testament looked *forward* to the saving work of Christ, even as the faithful of this present age look *back* to the saving work of Christ. Christ is the one mediator of both testaments. Christ, who himself was a member of the family of Abraham, is the vine. As some of the natural branches of Israel rejected the faith, the gospel was delivered to the nations. These wild branches are being grafted into the vine. Paul holds on to the idea that this ingrafting is provoking and will continue to provoke those hardened portions of Israel to jealousy that they might seek salvation in Jesus. **The end result is that Gentiles and Jews - the full number of the elect - will be saved through Jesus.** Remember, in the end, if the branches are natural or are wild, there is only one tree.

Paul sees that the Gentiles are coming to believe in Jesus. He understands himself as an apostle called to preach God’s mercy to the nations. Remember

that his hope is to establish a relationship with the church in Rome so that he might use Rome as a base for a planned mission to Spain. The Gentiles are receiving God's mercy in Christ. But Paul warns them. **Don't become arrogant, and don't despise the natural branches.** Don't revert back to the position Paul fought against in chapter nine - the idea that some people are entitled to God's mercy. Here in Paul's words, we also find a clear case against any kind of anti-Semitism. Paul tells the Romans clearly that they are not to be arrogant against those branches broken off, the as-of-yet hardened portions of Israel who may one day believe and be grafted in again. As I have mentioned before, that future conversion of Jewish people will be our subject next week.

So, Paul is clear. People are being grafted into the vine. People are converting to the Christian faith. People are being born again. **There is a faithful remnant of Israel, and Gentile branches are being grafted into the holy tree.** This is God's purpose and God's power at work. If we are grafted into Jesus, we have no room for entitlement or arrogance. Moreover, there is no reason for despair. We have every reason to hope. Amidst all the challenges of our culture, the church really does prosper and thrive. It grows, it blesses, and it trains up its people in the way of Jesus. This year is the perfect year for our church to continue to grow in number as we share the light of Jesus with others, and in depth, as we dig down deep into Jesus. You are a branch grafted into Jesus. You are called to abide in the vine. Some of you need encouragement today to go out and shine the light. **You need the faith to believe again that people can really be born again.** Some of you need encouragement today to find all the nourishment you can in Jesus. Life has been hard, but the resources that you need are there in the vine, in the Jesus to whom you are connected. And someone who hears these words is being called to believe in Jesus for the first time and become part of the vine in reality and not just name. If that is you, then my invitation to you is to come today - don't put it off - and in sincerity turn from your unbelief and sin and give yourself to Jesus, who died and rose from the dead for sinful men and women. He is the Savior, and he is the vine.