



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Romans 11:11-16

“God's Purpose in Israel's Fall”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The general theme of our series of studies is The Apostle Paul and the Purpose of the Ages or What is God Doing Now? We hope to complete our series in seven messages and this is the third entitled "God's Purpose in Israel's Fall."

In surveying the Scriptural ground that lies before us in this study, namely Romans 11, verses 11 through 16, Paul's principal points emerge quite plainly. As the apostle sees the future, the ultimate goal of God is the salvation of His people, composed of both his ancient covenant people Israel and the predominantly Gentile church that shares in the covenant promises.

The method by which God will accomplish this is also clear. He will accomplish His purpose (He is no frustratable deity) by the present Gentile salvation, which shall finally through Jewish jealousy bring ethnic Israel to Him. And the result of that remarkable return of His ancient people to Himself shall be boundless world blessing. It's truly an extraordinary view of the times to come.

Is there not, however, a note of the fantastically improbable about this scheme of things? With the history of nineteen hundred years now, can we imagine the Jews jealous of the church by reason of their possession of Jesus, the Palestinian Jew who claimed to be the Messiah?

There are things happening in Judaism, however, that might represent tentative steps along the way. I'm not referring to such recent movements as “Jews for Jesus,” although the successes of such movements in the evangelization of Jewish people are significant and have received widespread publicity. I am speaking of the Jewish movement to reclaim Jesus as their own but without, of course, the acknowledgment of His claims of Messianic authority. In fact, the phenomenon has been given a name in German literature regarding the matter, *die Heimholung Jesu*, or the bringing home of Jesus.

Many well-known names among Jewish scholars are among those who have shown deep interest in Jesus the Jew, such as Claude Montefiore, Israel Abrahams, Joseph Klausner, David Flusser, Samuel Sandmel, Geza Vermes, and Pinchas E. Lapide. There are many others. Jacob Jocz, a Jewish Christian scholar, for many years Professor of Systematic Theology at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, just a few years ago wrote these words, “The most remarkable development in Jewish culture is the increasing acceptance of Jesus the Jew.”

One must not, however, become overly optimistic about the present. I speak, of course, of Christians. In 1979 many were startled to read in Time that Pinchas Lapide, an Israeli Jew teaching in the University of Goettingen, was willing to accept the resurrection of our Lord as an historical event. It turned out, however, that he was only resurrected as other biblical figures of the Bible and Talmud, that is, restored to life to live again finally. In other words, amid the reclamation of Jesus by modern Jews, there is not yet a significant admission of his unique authority as the promised Messiah of Israel and Saviour of Gentiles, and thus Lord of both.

Is, then, this Jewish interest in Jesus a step along the way to that of which Paul writes in Romans 11, verse 12 and verse 15? No one really knows the answer to that interesting question, but with it in mind we turn to the next section of Romans chapter 11 in our studies of that remarkable book and that remarkable chapter.

And the apostle writes in the 11th verse of Romans 11, "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them (that is, the Jews) to jealousy." And so, we look at the Pauline question, a question that is a repetition of the question of verse 1, "I say then, Hath God cast away his people?"

The opening words of verse 11, "I say then," are clearly related to verse 1 of the chapter, where we have the same paragraph opening. He has shown that Israel's rejection is not complete; it is only partial. He will now show that it is not final; it is only temporary.

The question, verse 11 "Have they stumbled that they should fall?" In the course of making the point that the rejection is only partial, however, the apostle has very plainly pointed out that the majority who stumbled were hardened by God. It is natural, then, to expect the question, "I say, then, Have they stumbled that they should fall?" He has modified the question of verse 1, "Hath God cast away his people?" by making it clear that a remnant remains in a saving relationship with God.

Now in the following verses of the chapter he will answer the question. He will show, as one of the most recent commentators has put it quite simply, "the exclusion of the great majority of Jews is not permanent."

It is helpful to remember that the subject of the verb, "stumbled," is "the rest" of verse 7, or the mass of the nation who rejected their Messiah and were hardened. Further, the verb "fall" is in a tense that indicates that it most likely refers to an irrevocable fall. Thus, Paul's question, which due to the grammar of the original text expects the answer "no," means essentially this: "I say then, the mass of the nation has not stumbled that they might fall irrevocably, have they?"

But we still have a further question to deal with. Without attempting to settle the question of whether the clause "that they might fall irrevocably" is a purpose or result clause, we still must ask ourselves is the apostle speaking simply of the purpose or result

of the permanent rejection of the nation, or is he looking on to the ultimate, final, and essentially gracious purpose of God in His dealings with Israel? We might simply say that what Paul has in mind is the denial that the nation irrevocably fell. That would be in harmony with the context that follows, for he surely denies Israel's irrevocable fall. In verse 25 and verse 26, he will say, "And so all Israel shall be saved."

But, one might reply, "Did not those who stumbled fall with terminal consequences?" Therefore, it seems better to think of the apostle as referring to the ultimate purpose of Israel's definite fall. That is, Israel's fall was real, and it had the most serious consequences for those who fell. I speak of that generation particularly present upon the earth when the Lord Jesus Christ was here. However, the ultimate purpose of God was that through Israel's fall salvation might come to the Gentiles.

That, too, has a further design, the provoking of Israel to jealousy and salvation and a following world blessing. That's clearly what Paul has in mind in verse 12 and verse 15 of our chapter. As John Murray has said, "This development is exemplified in Jesus' prediction and in the history of the apostolic era. "Unbelief," another commentator has put it, "has its reverse side." So Israel's unbelief will issue in Gentile conversion and ultimately a worldwide conversion of both Jews and Gentiles.

So then, Israel stumbled and fell, but the divine purpose lying back of their fall was not that they should remain forever "lying on the ground," to use Godet's phrase, but should ultimately through Gentile salvation be returned themselves to their covenantal promised blessings.

Now, Paul further explains as the question is followed by the words in verse 11, "God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy."

Paul's first answer to the question "Have they stumbled that they should fall?" is a simple statement to the effect that an ultimate fall for the nation is unthinkable and blasphemous. "God forbid!" What about God's faithfulness, then?

Then having said that, he elucidates an aspect or two of the divine plan. So, secondly, the stumbling and falling of Israel, according to the divine plan, has eventuated in Gentile salvation, a state of things designed to provoke Israel to jealousy. In other words, as Gifford says, "Their recovery and not their fall was His aim." And as the commentator we cited in an earlier study suggested, there is a damper on joy in the Father's house as long as the elder brother, that is, the Jewish people, refuse to come in.

It would certainly be expected that a student of the situation in the largely Gentile church today would declare that there seems to be little in Christendom as we see it to provoke Israel to jealousy. One section of the church has returned to the weak and beggarly elements of the Law, while another faction preaches in huge sanctuaries built by strenuous financial appeals from evangelical con men the glories of prosperity theology and the gospel of self-esteem. I cannot see a thinking Israelite made very jealous by what he sees.

Back in the early days of the church, as the New Testament shows, men were either offended or attracted through the Spirit of God to the Messiah as the New Testament presents Him, that is, as a divine Son who redeems His people through a penal substitutionary sacrifice. But, as William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, once said of those who were preaching a different Christ, a liberal one, "Who would bother to crucify the Christ of liberal Christianity?" The weak, sentimental, faceless, goody-goody, the amiable carpenter of much liberalism would neither offend nor attract. It's no wonder that Israel is not interested by and large when a liberal gospel is proclaimed.

In verse 11, where Paul speaks of the term "fall", he refers to the stumbling of the majority. Even the rejection of Christ by Israel has prophetic significance, since it leads to the Gentile mission and ultimately, against its ancient will, to its own salvation. "The reversal of earthly relations," one German commentator has said, "is for its part simply a

stage on the divinely planned path whose end remains bound up in a special way, and against all appearances, with the destiny of Israel,"

The last clause of verse 11 is an allusion and application of Deuteronomy 32:21, previously cited in chapter 10 in verse 19. In that great passage, called by many commentators "Moses' Swan Song," containing what one Old Testament scholar called "A Divine Forecast of the Whole History of the Jewish People," the patriarch outlines the judgments that will fall upon the perversity of the nation. Included is the prophecy that Yahweh will bring the Gentile world into covenant with Him. But the ultimate goal is Israel's return to Him and to the land. Take a look in your reading of the Bible at Deuteronomy 32 and verse 43.

So, Israel failing in its mission to the Gentile world, for that was the reason that Israel was called, Isaiah says in chapter 43 of his book, and suffering divine disciplinary judgment, shall in the end, though unwilling to work in making Him known, wind up being saved through those to whom they were to witness. What a reversal of things!

Then Paul in verses 12 through 15 goes on to speak of the place of the Gentiles in the plan. There is the third of Paul's answers to the question here. It is "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall?," and then the third answer follows with the place of the Gentiles in the plan.

And his answer is grounded in the logic of the situation, namely, that the blessing of the Gentiles by Jewish stumbling, in the light of the unconditional promises of the Abrahamic Covenant to the nation and their certain recovery, leads inevitably to even greater world-blessing, in fact, something like life from the dead, so he says in verse 15 where he writes, "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but such a thing as life from the dead?. The blessing of the Gentiles is important, Paul sets forth, but their salvation is subordinate to a more ultimate and far-reaching purpose which is the conversion of the nation Israel as a whole.

In verse 12 there is a contrast between "diminishing" and "fullness." The diminution of the nation to a remnant of believers is the meaning of the first expression, and the return of the nation as a whole to belief is the meaning of the latter. The one is the status of the nation in the present age, only a remnant now in the people of God. The other looks on to the future national conversion. The threefold pronoun "them" must be given the same sense (that will prove important for our later studies) and refers to the majority of the nation, or the nation as a whole.

It is clear from this text itself that Israel's restoration is the Lord's instrument for world blessing. Perhaps this is why Godet speaks of "this mysterious decree of rejection." That the decree of rejection should lead to worldwide blessing is truly a surprising and remarkable thing.

It is also clear that "world" here refers to the world of Gentiles generally; it is defined in the context by the word "Gentiles." Nor does it mean here every single individual Gentile; it means the Gentiles as a whole, a truth important for the understanding of this passage and as well as others, especially passages like John 3:16 where we read, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." When the Apostle John records those words, he's speaking of God loving the world of Jews and Gentiles as the context of that gospel makes so plain.

Then following, in verse 13 the apostle writes, "For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, and I glorify my ministry." When Paul states that he speaks to the Gentiles, he lets us know that those that he has in mind specifically here in speaking to them is not the Jewish nation but the Gentiles to whom he was sent. And he is seeking to clarify his position. The Gentiles might think that he was not interested in Israel now because he has been ministering the word of God to them. Paul says it's not so. He labors as the apostle of the Gentiles, but the ultimate reach of his ministry includes his brethren, too. In fact, the more he makes of his apostleship, the

more jealous the Jews, leading finally to their restoration. And that, too, in turn means ever greater blessing for Gentiles, the world.

Incidentally, the Authorized Version's rendering of the Greek word *diakonia* by "office" is misleading. Apostleship was a spiritual gift, and the word in the text here should be rendered by the English word *ministry*. He glorifies his ministry.

The word "some" in verse 14, where he says, "And might save some of them," indicates that the apostle did not expect that all of Israel, or the nation as a whole, would be saved in his day. As the following context indicates, that is future. Kaesemann may be right in affirming that "apocalyptic is the driving force in Paul's theology and practice." He looks into the future constantly in his writing.

The "for" of verse 15, "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" explains why he labors for Gentiles to provoke Israel to jealousy, for their ultimate world-wide blessing depends upon Israel's restoration. The argument, as in verse 12, is a *fortiori* one, that is, a conclusion that follows with even stronger reason. Let me illustrate.

For example, if one is unwilling to trust another with his bicycle, then a *fortiori* he must not let him use his automobile. If you are not willing to lend your friend ten dollars, you certainly wouldn't want to lend your friend ten thousand dollars. So here, if Israel's rejection has led to such general Gentile blessings as is now evident, then what tremendous blessing must be coming from Israel's future restoration.

Several different opinions have been held of the meaning of the phrase, "life from the dead." First, some have seen in the phrase a reference to a general resurrection, as is taught in many Christian creeds. At the second coming of Christ, it is said, there shall be a general resurrection of all the dead, followed by a general judgment of all men. This is the view of a number of commentators.



Others refer the phrase strangely to spiritual life blessing for the Jews. The obvious parallel between verses 12 and 15 makes it likely that the spiritual benefits in this context refer to the Gentiles rather than the Jews.

Still other commentators, such as Godet, think the phrase is to be interpreted figuratively, but closely related to the previous phrase in verse 12, "the reconciling of the world." Something stronger than that is demanded, or in other words, something like Murray's unprecedented quickening for the world in the expansion and success of the gospel. (A moment ago I said that phrase "the reconciling of the world" was in verse 12, it's in verse 15, of course.)

If the bodily resurrection were meant, why did not Paul use the common term resurrection? Further, if he intended to refer to the bodily resurrection, why did he not use the article before "life from the dead"? "The life from the dead" would seem clearer, if resurrection were meant. A startling revolutionary conversion of Gentiles seems to be Paul's point, perhaps inclusive of the spiritual and material blessings of the age of the kingdom.

Now finally, a word about verse 16, which we will also consider in our next study. Verse 16, introduced by a transitional "now" gives the reason for the expectation of Jewish restoration. They were the recipients of the unconditional Abrahamic promises, God's elect nation. The two figures of the verse represent this with variations. Paul writes, "For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches." To understand them (that is, the figures), it will help to begin with what we know. The following context indicates and identifies the branches as the nation Israel. Thus, the lump also probably refers to them.

This latter figure is derived from Numbers chapter 15, verse 17 through verse 21, where it is stated that the presentation of a cake from the dough of the first-ground flour from the threshing floor hallowed the whole baking. The word "holy" means in this context consecrated to God for His blessing, that is, Abrahamic Covenant blessing. The

basic idea of both figures is that the consecration of the first-fruits, or root, is communicated to the lump, or the branches.

But what are the first-fruits and the root? While some have attempted to identify them with Christ Himself, it seems better to identify them with Abraham and the patriarchs. Verse 28 seems to make that fairly clear. The point is plain: The initial consecration to God of the patriarchs by the choice of Abraham, making them and their descendants the natural branches, is the basis of the expectation of the restoration of the nation. Put in another way, the consecration of the Patriarch Abraham extends to his seed, whether believing or not, for the attainment of the blessing depends ultimately upon the sovereign good pleasure of God who has proclaimed that the blessings of the covenant shall belong finally to the nation as a whole. One important proviso, however, lest we misunderstand. Individuals shall share in the blessings only if they believe in the patriarchs' Redeemer and Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle makes that very, very plain in chapter 4, verse 11 and 12, and then in chapter 9, verse 6 through verse 8.

We conclude, then, that there is justification for a Jewish reclamation of Jesus, for, unless this takes place, there is no inheritance of the Abrahamic Covenant blessings by the nation. He is the true seed of Abraham who shall accomplish the redeeming work upon which the ancient promises are grounded. And if the atoning work is not accomplished by the Messianic Redeemer, then there is no way that Abraham or any other individual Jew or Gentile may inherit the blessings of God. The reclamation, however, must be based upon an acknowledgment of the uniqueness of Jesus the Messiah, Son of God and Divine Saviour of men, both Jew and Gentile. As Nathaniel, the Israelite indeed in whom there was no guile, said of Him, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel." Israel's hope, and the Gentiles' hope too, I might say, rests upon this confession. May it come for them and for all the people of God soon.

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Next week we continue our study, and the title for the fourth of our studies is "The Gentiles Warned." And we'll look at verse 16 through verse 24 particularly. I hope you'll be listening then.