

Transformed into Humble Mission

Spring Sermon Series on Romans

Romans 11:1-36

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXT: Romans 11:1-36

This morning we press further into Romans. We have been listening this spring to *Being Transformed by the Gospel*. The gospel is absolutely central to Romans. Paul sees himself as set

ROMANS

"...PRESENT YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE, HOLY AND ACCEPTABLE TO GOD, WHICH IS YOUR SPIRITUAL WORSHIP. DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF YOUR MIND, THAT BY TESTING YOU MAY DISCERN WHAT IS THE WILL OF GOD, WHAT IS GOOD AND ACCEPTABLE AND PERFECT."
ROMANS 12:1-2 SERMON SERIES FEB 7 - MAY 29, 2016

apart for the gospel. He is eager to share the gospel in Romans 1:15. The gospel reveals God's righteousness in Romans 3:21. The gospel offers forgiveness, the beginning of new life, a new family, a new identity, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the past few weeks, we have been looking at how this transformation of the gospel begins to play out in our lives, that we are changed

from disobedience to obedience by the presence of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8, that we are changed by a soul anguish over those who do not yet know Christ in Romans 9. In Romans 10, we are changed into a people entrusted with the saving witness to the Gospel, and this morning, we want hear Romans 11 as it speaks to us as God's Word to change of us and transform us into humble mission. The benefits of the gospel in our lives can be pretty heady. They can make us arrogant even though we don't intend for it to happen. It's like when you get a new job and you look down on everyone who has been working there before you arrived. It's like when a new pastor takes the leadership of a church and imagines that everything that has gone before him or her is of no account. It's like receiving a new inheritance and dismissing those who have labored to acquire it. The gospel benefits in our lives can make us proud. They can also make us passive if we are not careful. We can wrongly and vainly imagine that we have been included and that's the sum end of the story. In reality, the gospel of Jesus Christ does something much more exciting. The gospel of Jesus Christ humbles us, fills us with awe and wonder that we too should be included in God's plans and purposes. The gospel makes us active in mission in the world around us. God saves us not just from His wrath, but for His witness in the world. In Romans 11, Paul writes the conclusion of this arc of thought that begins in Romans 9—90 verses that lead in the end to an outburst of praise. Paul has ministered for at least 25 years at this point. He is well familiar with the dangers and temptations, the

misunderstandings of the gospel, and he addresses these with great clarity and power in Romans 11. For our own sheer delight, we will find two *Qal va-Homers*, the “light” and the “heavy” reasoning that Paul’s uses so often, along the way.

Romans 11 addresses us and reminds us that we are humbled and privileged to be involved in God’s saving purposes, that we been included in something that began long, long ago. The specific temptation that arises for many new Christians is to imagine that the gospel’s coming to us means specifically, in Paul’s setting, that God is finished with Israel as a people. There can be a theological amnesia that besets the church. As the numbers of the nations grow, we forget that we become grafted in, that we are part of a much larger story that begins in Genesis and leads all the way to Revelation. As we look at Romans 11 together, we want to follow Paul’s thought as it stirs us and challenges us into humble mission. Romans 11 begins with a question. Paul knows this is working within us, and he says in Romans 11:1:

“I ask, then, has God rejected His people?”

Has He cast them aside, His ancestral people of which he is a part ethnically? He asks: “Are they finished in God’s economy of salvation?” And there is that little phrase again: “By no means!”, the most emphatic, negative rejection possible in the Greek language. He says: “Absolutely not!” That would give you the totally wrong idea, if you imagine that Christianity has no connection with the narrative of the Bible. He says in Romans 11:1b:

“For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”

God has not rejected His people. Paul writes in Romans 11:2:

“Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?”

It seemed to Elijah that the portion of faithful people in Israel was so small, and he was so discouraged and depressed, and says: “No one is serving You, Lord. I am the only one.” Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever thought: “I’m the only one in my family system really serving God”? God gently reminds Elijah, as Paul quotes in Romans 11:4:

“I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

So Paul reminds his readers, reminds us today, that there is a remnant chosen by God’s grace; that God is not finished with any people. There will be some from everywhere in the great salvation community, which is the church, and this is by God’s grace. It is not by human achievement; it is not by the works of man; it is not a birthright as he has labored to show in Romans 9 and 10. Yet he recognizes, to his own anguish, that many of his own kinsman have not recognized Christ. I am often asked this question. When people figure out that I have a PhD from a Jewish Theological School, they ask me: “How is it that all Jews don’t believe that Jesus is the Messiah? How is it possible?” My first response to that is always the same. I say: “I don’t

know how *all people* don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah." The problem of unbelief is not distinct to one ethnic group. Like what Jonathan asked me when he was very young and we were driving into Kenwood, one of among the 50,000 cars driving by Kenwood Baptist Church every day, Jonathan looked me and spoke from the back seat and said, "Dad, why aren't all the cars turning in to worship on Sunday morning?" Why don't all believe? Yet, we have discovered in Scripture that reality for anyone to believe is God's powerful, sovereign movement in our lives, that the grace of God breaks open our hardened hearts. And Paul says: "Some are believing, and I am evidence of this." He asked the church to consider in Romans 11:11a:

"So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall?"

Again, an emphatic negation: "*By no means!*" Don't think of Israelites as beyond reach. The church at times throughout church history has suffered from this theological amnesia and imagined that God is finished with Israel, so I am a member of God's people now. They missed their opportunity and God is finished. Paul asks: "Did they stumble in this way to fall forever? Are they beyond the pale, beyond reach? Are they down and out forever?" Absolutely not! His answer is deep water, but he says instead the reality is that their missing of the Messiah, the fact that they miss the Messiah, was part of God's plan. He says in Romans 11:11b:

"Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles. . ."

The fact that they missed the Messiah led to the Messiah's crucifixion and death for the sins of the world, which brought salvation to all nations, and now the nations are streaming in. Notice the effect of new believers in Romans 11:11c:

". . . so as to make Israel jealous."

The effect of new Christians coming into the fold has the result of making God's ancestral people envious, jealous, and this is a good kind of jealousy. I remember when I was courting Christine. We never dated; we just went straight to courting. When I was a student at the time in graduate school, the male to female ratio was 10:1: ten men for every one woman, so there was a lot of movement, a lot of competition, a lot of survival of the fittest. I remember this one moment in particular walking down the streets with her in Boston and thinking I really have the inside track on this beautiful, godly woman who was smarter than I was, and this other guy sort of cut me off, and I felt what I might say was a holy jealousy in that moment. We see that God works through salvation coming to the nations to provoke His own people. Paul says God is not finished with them, so don't become arrogant. That is the biggest burden for us in this text as it unfolds. Here comes the first *Qal va-Homer*. If you haven't been around Kenwood in recent weeks and you have no idea what I'm talking about, a *Qal va-Homer* is a standard way of reasoning from Scripture that Paul was taught as a student. It is a reasoning from the *light* to the *heavy*. *Qal* is light; *Homer* is heavy, and the *Qal va-Homer* of Romans 11:12 says:

"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!”

If it is true that their trespass, their stumbling, has this very positive effect in bringing riches of salvation to the world, then how much more is it the case that their being included in salvation will be a blessing? He is urging the new Gentile believers not to become arrogant that they've been included. He wants them to remain humble. He says this explicitly in Romans 11:13-14:

“Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.”

He is saying: “I'm speaking to you Gentiles, you among the nations. I'm glorifying in fact my ministry to you. I am celebrating what God is doing among you in order precisely to provoke my fellow kinsman to a holy jealousy, a right envy.” Does your relationship with Jesus Christ make those around you want the same? That's what he is saying. Is your love for Jesus Christ so evident? Is the transformed life that has become real in you so palpably evident to those around you that people say I would like to have that? He says: “I'm making a big deal about what God has done with you. I'm not going to go into detail about your idolatry, immorality, and the fact that your life was a total disaster before you met Jesus Christ, we all know that, but now your life is different. Your life is different, and I am making a big deal about that because I want my kinsman to know that though they have the Word of God, though they have the promises, though the Messiah has come from their lineage, I want them to see your changed life as the most powerful, irrefutable evidence that the Messiah has come.” Do you believe that? You can't make that happen, but when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and starts to change you, people notice that. They really do. Paul says that the Corinthians can actually smell it. We are the aroma of Christ, he says, an image of incense rising.

We were at a restaurant recently. We had come from church, and we stopped at a restaurant, and the woman who was seating people, just out of nowhere, though it is a restaurant where we've gone multiple times, just launched into: “Are you Christians? Do you go to church? Can I go to church?” She was from a different ethnic background. She said, “I've never been to a church. Would you kick me out if I came?” She was serious, and she said, “Could I come?” I said, “We would love for you to come. The church is open to everyone.” Later, my own children asked, “How did she know that? Was it the clothes we were wearing? Was it a name tag that said ‘I'm a Christian, ask me’?” “No,” I told my own children, “people can smell it. They can smell Christ.” And Paul was saying: “I'm making a big deal about what God is doing in you, because you are part of God's mission in the world.” This is an awesome, humbling privilege. He says in Romans 15:15:

“For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”

The death and resurrection of the Messiah is written into the narrative of Scripture. It is part of the macro story of Israel, and now he tells the church in two very vivid and powerful metaphors about the nature of reality, God's saving community, those who are inside the fold. He uses one metaphor that he doesn't develop at length. It's the metaphor of the dough and firstfruits offered. Picking up the imagery from Leviticus, he says in Romans 11:16:

"If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches."

It is the second metaphor that he develops at length is the image of a tree, and this tree is one we must understand. He says if the root of the tree is holy, so are the branches. Yet, he says in Romans 11:17:

"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. . ."

The point of this is very clear in Romans 11:18:

". . . 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."

Don't be arrogant that you have been included in the gospel. Don't forget three quarters of the story. Don't put an iron wall between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Don't imagine that Genesis through Malachi has no bearing on your identity in life. Don't be arrogant towards the branches, he says. Remember it's not you who support the root; the root supports you. This image is that of an olive tree. I saw the coolest olive tree in my life last summer, and this is it. This tree in Crete was 1000 years old when God called Abraham. I'm going to say that again, because you don't believe me. Some of you are thinking that's impossible. This tree is 5000 years old. It was 1000 years old when God said to Abraham: "I want you to go to the land I will call you to." It's an old tree,



and it is still pumping out fruit year by year. A branch from this olive tree was used in both the Athens Olympics and the Beijing Olympics to crown the victors. It is one of the oldest trees on the planet. Olive trees are old, and olive trees have this phenomenal capacity of having branches that can be clipped from another tree and grafted into the tree. The tree is centuries old, and yet when a branch is grafted into it,

the tree absorbs it. This image is of a tree that is from the Mount of Olives in Israel, and you can see that there are new branches coming out from the side of the middle central section of the tree. They have been grafted into this old tree, and what's amazing is that when they have been grafted in, the branches then become fruit-bearing. They become fruit-bearing precisely because they are grafted into this ancient tree.



Paul wants the believers to know that in Christ they have been made part of a bigger story, a God story that began in Genesis.

He wants to remind us today that ethnic Israelites who do not believe in Christ look like they are broken off. He says in Romans 11:19:

“Then you will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’”

He says: “It is true that you have been grafted in, but what is really true is that the Israelites have been broken off because they lacked faith in Christ.” The point is yet again in Romans 11:20:

“That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.”

Do not become proud. Don't become proud and think: “Well, the time is right for me. God is done with you. Now I'm here.” Don't walk into your new job and say: “Now that I'm here I'm taking over. All decisions flow through me. I don't care what the rest of you have done before I got here.” I remember Dave Hansen's telling me—actually he didn't tell me, he modeled it for me—but I heard him tell someone else who asked him: “What do I need to know when I begin a new pastoral role?” Dave said: “What you need to know is you need to learn just enough in seminary that you don't get fired in the first five years. Walk in and respect what God has been doing before you got there. Participate with what God is doing.” Paul warns us, don't become proud. They are broken off because they didn't believe. But, what's amazing is that if they do not continue in unbelief, what happens? Just like that potter's vessel a couple of weeks ago, they can be remade. As soon as anyone believes, they get grafted into the story. It doesn't matter if you're from Mongolia; it doesn't matter if you're from North Korea; it doesn't matter if you're from the Philippines; it doesn't matter if you grew up as a secular Jew; it doesn't

matter if you're from Blue Ash, as soon as you believe in Jesus Christ you are grafted into God's people.

The olive tree in Scripture is an image that is used multiple times to describe this flourishing people of God, and he reminds them that if they believe, they will be brought in. In Romans 11:24, we see our second *Qal va-Homer*. He says:

“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.”

I want you to notice with great care how many trees are in this image. There is one! There is one tree. This is so important because, lest we be wise in our own understanding, we will imagine that the church is God's Plan B or a second variation on the theme. We also might imagine that ethnic Israel has an alternative way to salvation other than faith in Christ, and this will demotivate us from mission. You can become proud by having amnesia and think that the whole Bible is not necessary. You can also express this pride by an absence of mission. There is only one tree. In Romans 9:10, Paul recognizes with anguish of soul that those who had been in the community of faith are broken off by not believing in Christ, while you are grafted in. But he wants them to know God's saving purpose and that God is capable of grafting in any who believe from among the nations and from among ethnic Israelites. For the third time in this passage he warns in Romans 11:15:

“Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”

The hardening that is on Israel is partial. It is not on all; it is just in part. The hardening that is on the nations, it's just in part, not on all. God's activity in the world is to bring in the fullness of the redeemed, and he says that it is in this way that all Israel will be saved.

Romans 11:25-26 is very crucial passage in Paul's understanding and motivation of his mission. There is a frequent interpretation of this passage that has become very popular in the last hundred years. This interpretation runs something like this: The first part is that the mystery is something new that breaks in all of a sudden into the train of Paul's thought and that he says: “I want you to understand this mystery and here is something brand-new.” The second part of this interpretation says that the mystery then is that a partial hardening has come on Israel and then, at the last possible moment of history, all ethnic Israelites will be converted. The third part of this indicates that all Israel, all Israelites according to the flesh, will be saved. This is very popular. It has become popular in the last hundred years. It was relatively unknown before that, and I want to submit to us with great humility that I think this interpretation is flawed in some important ways, in each of these ways. The first is that the language of *mystery* in Paul is

not used to introduce something as a flash of new insight. The *mystery* according to Paul is explicitly stated. Ephesians 2 and Ephesians 3 describe the *mystery*. The *mystery* is something known, revealed, exposed, identified, and it is made known precisely in the gospel. Paul writes in Ephesians that mystery is not that all Israelites according to the flesh will be converted at the last day. That is not what he says. What he says very clearly in Ephesians 2 and 3 is that the mystery is that the nations of the world are co-heirs in the gospel, that the gospel makes known the mystery. It is not hidden; it is not just laid out right here. It has been made known. The mystery has been described in Romans chapters 1 through 11. The mystery is that God has come in faithfulness to His promises to Abraham, died for the sins of the world, and called all people to believe. If you don't believe that, then you have to get off the bus. If you do believe it, then you get on the bus, and there are no backseats to this bus. It means that all who received Christ are co-heirs of the new heavens and new earth. There is no alternative method of salvation. It subverts the whole logic of Romans to say that at the end of the day one particular group gets a free pass to eternity by birthright. He has been pleading the opposite of that for 11 chapters. If that were true, then the anguish of Romans 9 makes no sense. The anguish of Paul's soul is that his kinsman might believe. His soul anguish in Romans 10 is that the covenant has been renewed. His soul anguish in Romans 11 is that you and I don't become so proud that we stop being missional. The mystery is not something that happens at the last moment. It is something that has happened in Christ. He says that the mission continues. He speaks of a partial hardening. That's what he wants the Gentiles to know. That's what he wants them to avoid. He wants them to avoid what can easily happen to the church. The church in the second century in Rome forgot the first half of the story. Actually it's the first three quarters of the story.

The first real heretical teaching of the church in the second century came from a man named Marcion, a bishop in Asia Minor who taught in Rome. Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was fundamentally different from the God of the New Testament. Marcion taught that we should have a hard distinction between Old and New Testament. Marcion taught that the character of God in the Old Testament was to be distinguished from the character of the God of the New Testament. He published his own version of the Bible that got rid of the Old Testament. He got rid of Matthew because it was too Jewish, and he ended up with a Bible that was just Luke and some of Paul's letters. He was a wealthy businessman, and he gave big donations to the church, which sometimes can be confusing. Praise God, the church in AD 144 said that is not the gospel, and the first banishing of false teaching was this one, early. Yet, some of us today, though we would not say, "I follow Marcion's teaching," have been affected by this thinking in ways. Paul says this is not the case. God's saving purpose continues. He wants them to know that the mystery is Christ in you the hope of glory. That's the mystery. The mystery isn't an alternative path of salvation. I could weep 1000 hours over this. I have Jewish

friends that I really love, and they can't see it. I feel like I believe their Book more than they do. They don't see it, and yet some do. I'll never forget when I gave my doctoral defense to a panel of Jewish scholars. I learned a lot from them, and I remember my doctoral advisor getting up to introduce me. In front of all these people he said: "It's really been a privilege to have David here as a student. We have learned some things from him." I thought: "Oh, if you could learn just one thing from me it would be that what God has promised you, He has done, and He has called all nations of the world to believe." That is Paul's labor, his missionary burden. He wants the nations to know that the hardening is in part so that they don't get cocky and think: "He is done with you, so it's all about us." He reminds them that this is a partial hardening, not in full, and that this hardening changes immediately when someone believes. When anyone believes, their eyes are opened. He said it so easy for them to be re-grafted into their own story. He says this is the way in Romans 11:26:

"And in this way all Israel will be saved, . . ."

Some English translations render *in this way* as *and so*, as though it is a chronological indicator, but it's not. That little word *in this way* in Romans 11:26 describes the manner. It's the same little word that is used in John 3:16: "*In this manner* God loved the world." How? "That He sent His Son into the world to die for the sins of the world." This is the manner that all Israel will be saved, through faith in Jesus Christ. Gentile believers need to know that salvation isn't Israel's story. It's an Old Testament story that has flourished now in the gospel, and he quotes from Isaiah 27, Isaiah 59, and Jeremiah 31. He wants us to remember, as he says in Romans 11:16b-27:

"The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will banish ungodliness from Jacob; and this will be My covenant with them when I take away their sins."

The church needs the Old Testament. The church needs humble mission to all peoples in the world. You can never say to anyone, to any ethnic group: "God is finished with you. There is no more room on this bus. If there are any empty seats left, they are going to be for my people, but not yours." You can't say that. You can never say that. The mystery of God is known in the gospel. The nations are co-heirs. Mission continues, saved by grace, and this is the way that all Israel will be saved. This is a little phrase: "All Israel will be saved." This is a phrase that Paul knew as a young man. It is one of the most repeated lines in the synagogue liturgy. This little phrase, "All Israel will have a share in the world to come," is repeated thousands of times in the synagogue liturgy. He knew this phrase, but the way it was used for him before he knew Christ was that the way to be saved was to become part of Israel. The way to become part of Israel was to be circumcised, to begin to live the Torah life. Now Paul generously realizes that God's promise has been fulfilled and accomplished, that Israel's Messiah has come and that all who believe are now descendants of Abraham. You are Abraham's descendant if you have believed. It also means with terror and awe that none can presume to own this ancestry by birthright, but

faith in Christ is required for all.

If we at Kenwood Baptist Church believe that the people of God are a single olive tree and that you become part of that olive tree by faith in Christ, then we will get engaged in mission. The great thing about the olive tree is, as old as it is, it still receives new branches, and those branches bear fruit. Paul reaches the end of Romans 11, and he is overwhelmed. He says: "Look, nations, you were disobedient to God, but now you have received mercy." Israel has become disobedient so that they would receive mercy, and he looks up at his Heavenly Father, and he says in Romans 11:32:

"For God has consigned all to disobedience, that He may have mercy on all."

How is anyone saved? It's by God's mercy. It is mercy for all. There is no second route; there is no alternative path. If there is no alternative path, if there is one way of salvation, Jesus Christ, that means as a people entrusted with this message, we must be in the community sharing it. We can never say to anyone, "It's not for you." Romans 1 through 11 ends as all real theological reflection must end, with an outburst of praise. Paul can't keep it in. Romans 11:33-35, the ending of Romans 11, is an outburst of praise:

"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?"

He ends in Romans 11:36:

"For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen."

From Him, His plan; through Him, His agency, His triumph at the cross. To Him, to the praise of His glory. I plead with you, do not be proud. The gospel makes us humble. We are so privileged, I am so privileged, to be brought into a story I did not write. We are so privileged to be on a mission that comes from God. It is through Him, and unto Him. Do not become proud, that we would look down on any. Do not become passive, that we would refrain from this glorious mission in the world. What God has promised, He has done, and this invitation is for all. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the gift of Christ. We thank You for the mystery that is known, Christ revealed, dying for the sins of the world, the Seed of Abraham. Father, forgive us for where we have fallen off on one side and imagine that the purpose of God was the rejection of Israel so that we might be included. Forgive us for that. At the same time, Father, forgive us for imagining that any are beyond Your reach. Forgive us for the passivity of thinking that anyone has a separate route to You other than Jesus Christ. I pray for Kenwood Baptist Church. I pray for David Palmer. I pray for all of us that we would follow the leading of Your Spirit where

Romans is taking us, and that is to join Your mission in the world with great urgency and dedication. We love You Lord. You are awesome. What You have done is awesome. Press our understanding forward and grip our hearts with these things I pray.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.