

God's People: True Topsoil

Romans 11:1-27

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In Matthew 13 Jesus was standing around with a large group of good people. His disciples were there, a bunch of religious folk, some friends, some seekers, and then to top everything off Jesus' mom and brothers showed up.

And with everyone there Jesus told a story. He said, there was a farmer who went out to sow and some of his seed fell on the path and got eaten – it never lived at all. Some other seed fell in shallow soil where it sprang up quick and looked great, but when the sun came out it cooked and died. Other seed started growing but was surrounded by weeds and got choked out, and it died too. Depressing story.

But finally there was some seed that landed in good soil. It grew and grew and stayed protected. And finally when it was fully grown the farmer harvested a huge crop.

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Now we know that everyone in the crowd was looking at Jesus with blank faces because the disciples, who would have understood better than anyone else, had to ask Him what He meant – we were fishing two weeks ago, are we farmers now? But it turns out the point of Jesus' story perfectly lines up with what Paul digs into in one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament.

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Good morning. If you're new with us we are walking through the book of Romans. And we are in the pesky section in the middle now. Most people who preach Romans stop at chapter 8, a few pick it back up in chapter 12, but only those who are either a bit crazy or too OCD to miss a section do the stuff in the middle. And for good reason!

There's a lot of tricky theology here. So back in chapter 9 Paul wrestles through whether we have free will or whether we are predestined. And his answer is "yes." And today he wrestles with an equally difficult question – if you get saved are you saved for good? Or is it possible to lose your salvation? And guess what? His answer is "yes." So, have a great week, we'll see you next week for chapter 12.

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Nope, can't do it. Crazy and OCD. So open your Bible to Romans 11. And would you stand with me as we come before God's word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Romans 11:1-27]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Okay, a bit of context to bring us back up to speed. Paul's a Jew who loves Jesus. But most of his brothers and sisters don't. And this is a major problem because of the Old Testament. You see Jesus pops into history as the culmination of a story that had been going on for centuries.

And the story of the Old Testament is that God has a Chosen People that He is working through. Now they are pretty pesky. Even the best of them can't get their act together. But regardless, God chose them and keeps being faithful.

So right at the beginning we get this guy named Abram – later he gets his name changed to Abraham. But in Genesis 12 God makes him a promise saying “I’m going to bless you and make you into a great nation. I’ll bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. And I’m going to bless the whole world through you.” It’s an awesome promise!

And then God dials it up. Three chapters later God tells Abram that He wants to cut a covenant with him, and Abram should prepare. Now this sounds strange to us, but Abram knew exactly what this meant. A covenant is a contract with death on the line.

So to cut a covenant meant to get a bunch of animals and cut them in half and put them on either side of a ditch so that the blood ran into the middle. And if the two parties were equal, they would both walk through the ditch getting blood all over them, while if one party was stronger then only the weaker party would walk through the ditch. And as they were splashing blood on themselves, they would say, “If I break this covenant may I be torn in half like these animals.” That’s how you cut a covenant.

And so Abram was gearing up to make that walk when God puts him to sleep. And God, the stronger party, walks through the ditch promising to bless Abram, give his descendants the promised land, and bless the whole world through them. And God said, “if I don’t make this happen then may I be cut in half like these animals.”

Now Abram was sleeping the whole time this was going on, so he promised nothing. The covenant was totally unconditional. And the whole Old Testament plays this out. God’s people keep dropping the ball, and yet God keeps being faithful.

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So now you see the problem Paul’s dealing with in Romans 9 to 11. God appears to be moving on. The Jews aren’t believing in Jesus. And so Paul knows his readers are asking both, “If God’s moving on now, has He been unfaithful to His unconditional promise?” And, “if God will move on from the Jews will He move on from the Gentiles too?” These are the big questions we are going to deal with today.

So here’s our outline if you’re taking notes. First, we are going to look at four reasons Paul doesn’t think that God has failed to keep His promises even though most of the Jews aren’t embracing Jesus. And second, we will look at the question of whether when you get saved you are saved for life, or whether you can lose your salvation. If you’re taking notes, that’s where we’re going today.¹ Buckle up!

¹ Outline adapted from JD Greear <https://summitchurch.com/message/will-god-forsake-his-people> (Accessed May 1, 2024)

First, has God failed to keep His unconditional promise to Israel? Paul says “no” for four reasons. Let’s look at the first one in verse 1. Paul says:

I ask, then, has God rejected His own people, the nation of Israel? Of course not! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin.
(Romans 11:1)

So Paul’s first reason why God hasn’t failed to keep His promise to the Jews is the “Paul argument.” He – Paul – is a Jew. And God’s using Paul to bring His gospel to the nations. So God hasn’t rejected the Jews. He’s still using them. That’s it.

Okay, that was easy but we’re just getting started. The second reason God hasn’t been unfaithful to His people is what we could call the “election argument.” In verse 2 Paul says “God hasn’t rejected His people, whom He chose from the very beginning.”

So if you remember back to chapter 9, from the beginning not every Israelite has belonged to God. So Abraham had two sons. There was Isaac and there was Ishmale. And Isaac was the son of promise, but Ishmale was not.

And then Isaac grew up and had two sons – Jacob and Esau. And Jacob embraced God’s promises, but Esau did not. And God says I’ve chosen to build a family for Myself through Abraham, but the family I’m building isn’t a blood line, it’s a faith line. It’s people who put their faith in Me that I elect. That’s the second argument.

And Paul keeps going. Paul’s third reason for why God hasn’t failed to keep His promises to His people is the “Elijah argument.”

Now Elijah is this awesome prophet who has seen God move in power, and yet one day he’s praying and complaining about how he’s the last man standing for God. Do you ever feel like that? In my school. At my job. I’m the last one. He feels alone.

But God tells him, “Not true. I’ve preserved 7000 who have never bowed the knee to Baal.” And Paul says same thing today God has a remnant. But don’t think “the faithful few”. That’s not quite what God is getting at. In Hebrew numbers are idioms – they mean things – and 1000 means all of them, and 7 means perfect completion. So 7000 means the complete number of all God’s people. God’s saying, “I haven’t lost a single one of My children. They are all here.” I’m just working in ways you don’t expect and don’t recognize.

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Now don’t miss this, whenever things look bad this is reality. God’s always growing His kingdom in different ways than we think. Like after Jesus’ resurrection the Romans started killing the Apostles. It looked bad for the church. And nobody would have believed you if you said, in 200 years the church will be exploding with Romans. That’s impossible. But Jesus loves to do the impossible. And this is what happened.

Then, in the fourth century, if you said the center of Christianity would shift from Rome to Europe everyone would have said, “that’s crazy. Europe is full of barbarians.” And yet, that’s what happened. God always does the unexpected.

And a few centuries later, if you said “There will be more Jesus followers on a continent we haven’t found yet than anywhere else,” people would have said “you’re crazy.” But that’s because God is always doing stuff beyond anything you could ask or imagine. And so, while culture today mocks the demise of Christianity, Jesus’ kingdom is alive and well as always.

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I was talking with someone from Iran the other day who told me that there are up to 8 million Christians in the underground church of Iran. That’s 10% of the population. And they aren’t cultural Christians who just “check the Christian box” on a census, they are hard core Jesus followers who are willing to die for their faith. God is always faithful to His people. He’s just working in different ways and with different people than we could ever expect. That’s the “Elijah argument.”

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So God has been faithful to His unconditional promises. There’s the Paul argument, the election argument, the Elijah argument and finally, in verses 11-15, Paul gives the “God’s strategy” argument. Paul says:

Did God’s people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. But He wanted His own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves. Now if the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God’s offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it.... For since their rejection meant that God offered salvation to the rest of the world, their acceptance will be even more wonderful. It will be life for those who were dead! (Romans 11:11-15)

What we get here is God’s three stage strategy with the Jews. So first the Jews mostly reject Jesus. And of course God knew this was going to happen just like He knew Adam and Eve were going to eat the fruit. None of this is a surprise, but it also doesn’t ruin His plan.

In fact, God is so big and so awesome that when we work with God He builds His kingdom, and when we rebel against Him, He builds His kingdom. So back in the Garden God wasn’t scrambling to find a way to make lemons into lemonade when the fruit got eaten. The world needing a Savior had always been God’s ‘Plan-A’. He always wanted to show us how much He loves us, and there was no better way than God coming to die in our place. Try to do the math on that!

And similarly God’s not on another back-up-plan when the Jews reject Jesus. God’s not saying “Oh well, every cloud has a silver lining, at least I can save some Gentiles now.”

No. God’s plan has always been to bless the world through Abraham. His plan was always to make a faith people from the seed of faith that sprouted in Abraham. But this means everything the Gentiles get is connected to the Jews. So verse 16 says:

For if the roots of the tree are holy, the branches will be, too. (Romans 11:16)

In other words it's only because God chose the Jews that the gentiles get saved. If we're not part of their tree we aren't part of the tree. And God brought this new life into existence through something that looked like the death of His people.

But that's all just stage 1 of God's strategy. In stage 2 we find that God is saving the Gentiles to make the Jews jealous... Now this sounds strange, but it's a good jealousy.

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Imagine my kids rejected Nikki and me and ran away from home. And then Nikki and I adopted some orphans. And at Christmas we were all around the tree when our kids peeked in the window and saw all the joy and happiness. And they said to each other – "that's our happiness. That's supposed to be us."

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There's a sense that the Jews resent Christians for the intimacy we have with their God. They resent that we can be people after the heart of God like David, or friends of God like Abraham, or live in the presence of God like Moses. God has Christians at a Christmas feast that belongs to the Jews. And they're jealous on the outside.

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And that leads to the third stage of God's strategy which Paul describes as some future moment when Israel is going to return. Verse 25 says:

I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. And so all Israel will be saved.

(Romans 11:25-26)

Now this doesn't mean every Jewish person – it's always the faith line. But certainly there will be such a revival among Jews that you could speak of it as a national conversion. The point is even though the Jews initially rejected God's Messiah, this all plays into God's strategy, so God has not been unfaithful to His promise.

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Alright, there is another 1000 feet we could dig here, but instead we are going to conclude with the question Paul tackles in verse 17 which is: When you get saved, are you saved for good, or can you lose your salvation? Look what he says:

Some of these branches from Abraham's tree—some of the people of Israel—have been broken off. And you Gentiles... have been grafted in. So now you also receive the blessing God has promised Abraham.... But you must not brag about being grafted in.... You are just a branch, not the root.... those branches were broken off because they didn't believe in Christ, and you are there because you do believe. So don't think highly of yourself, but fear what could happen. For if God did not spare the original branches, He won't spare you either. (Romans 11:17-21)

So there were branches in the Jewish family that didn't bear fruit. Think the Esaus and the Ishmales who didn't believe. And God cut them off. And in their place God grafted in the Gentiles who put their faith in Jesus.

But Paul says don't take your faith for granted. God's not tied to you just because you're here. God is creating a faith family for Himself, and if you're not living by faith you can be cut off just like the non-elect Jews.

Think about it: the Jews had access to all the information about God. They knew the whole story of faith. They had the prophets and knew how to follow God's law. But there is a difference between knowing about God and knowing God.

And Christians can get this wrong too. We can know about God, but not know Him. We can follow His rules, but not be excited about living for His glory. And these aren't the same thing. It's the difference between being a cultural Christian and a real Christian.

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I was 18 and graduating from Cedars. I was the president of the student council and the Valedictorian. I was the head of an inter-church youth group that sought to bring kids to Jesus from around the city. And it was at this time that my best friend told me he was getting baptised. So in a flash I said – I want to do this too!

Now, to be honest, baptism wasn't something I'd thought of before. But it was certainly something I knew I was going to do at some point. And this looked like the point. So I wrote up a testimony and took the plunge. And all of this sounds standard until I mention that it was 6 months later that I met Jesus, and my faith came to life. I got baptised before I became a Christian.

It was at 19 that I fell in love with Jesus and my heart changed so that I went from being good because Christians are good, to wanting to live for Jesus' glory and wanting to follow His laws. It was duty and culture before, but now it was love. And these things are not the same.

You see sometimes people get a distorted view of eternal security. Eternal security says "once saved, always saved. You can't lose your salvation." And it's true. Jesus says:

My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from Me, for My Father has given them to Me, and He is more powerful than anyone else. (John 10:27-29)

Jesus says there is nothing in the universe powerful enough to take His sheep away. That's eternal security! But like predestination or free will – where the answer is "yes" – the Bible presents some paradox here as well.

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So I know a guy who says "I'm an atheist, but I haven't always been one. I went to camp as a kid and got saved – and I was really saved. I came back and joined the youth group and went to Bible school and even became a pastor. I was all the way saved. And then stuff happened and God got put on the back burner at first. And after a while I just realized I didn't believe. And now I'm sure all faith is a lie and God is a sham. I hate the idea of Christianity. I have Jesus. I'm having way too much fun living my own way.

But guess what, the church I got saved into believed in eternal security which means if you're right and there is a God, then I win. And if I'm right and there is no God, then I win too. So who cares. Once saved always saved." But look what Paul says:

Yes, but remember—those branches were broken off because they didn't believe in Christ, and you are there because you do believe. So don't think highly of yourself, but fear what could happen. For if God did not spare the original branches, He won't spare you either. (Romans 11:21-22)

The Bible says our salvation is eternally secure and absolutely dependant on the continuation of our faith. You see the mark of saving faith is that it endures to the end. If your faith endures that is the evidence that you have a salvation you can't lose. If your faith doesn't persevere you never had it at the start. Another way to say this is that saving faith is staying faith.

And that's the point of Jesus story of the sower. Those seeds that sprouted quickly in rocky and thorny soil looked awesome in the beginning. It looked like they were saved. But then the sun baked and the thorns choked and it turned out those seeds were never part of the farmer's harvest.

And so here's the challenge of Romans 11: don't grow complacent in your faith. No one loses their salvation, but saved people spend their lives pursuing the glory of God because they love Him. Saved people want to live their lives for His glory.

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Now the temptation here is to worry about other people who might not be saved, but that's not the point. Jesus' story about the seed isn't about people you evangelize, it's about you. And Paul says the same here - worry about yourself. Check your own heart. Are you following Jesus because it's the right thing to do, or has your heart changed so you long to please the Lord?

Friends, this is what it means to put your faith in Jesus. So don't grow complacent. Instead foster a holy discontent that makes you jealously hungry for more of Jesus. Have you got someone in your life who is living out an encounter with Jesus? Covet that for yourself. Conspire and get it.

And root out those things that scorch and choke your faith. Don't watch that stuff. Don't read that stuff. Instead surround yourself with things and people that cause your faith to sprout. Provoke your love of Jesus to mature because everything is on the line.

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And, if you realize you've been playing games with God – you've been being good but not loving Jesus – today's the day to repent. So draw a line in the sand and say, "from here on Jesus You're my Lord. I'm going to live for Your glory. I'm not content knowing about God, I want to know Him. Let Jesus plant your seed in the True Topsoil so it thrives to harvest.