

“Did God Reject His People?”

Sermons on Romans # 28

Texts: Romans 11:1-15; Isaiah 29:1-10

When the apostle Paul stated in Romans 10:1 that it was his heart’s desire and prayer to God for his fellow citizens of Israel to be saved, the question of Israel’s place in the future course of redemptive history was clearly on his mind. Paul’s poignant question which opens Romans 11, “did God reject his people?” clearly indicates the apostle’s anguish regarding the future of his people, the Jews. Recall that Paul is answering a series of questions raised by the fact that the gospel went first to the Jew and then the Gentile. Since Israel rejected the gospel, Paul must answer the question as to whether or not God rejected his people. Why has Israel come under God’s curse? Will there be a distinct role for national Israel in the future? And if so, what is the nature of that role? Does a future role for ethnic Israel mean that there will be a future earthly millennial age upon the earth in which will Israel figure prominently?

We now begin a what amounts to a two-part sermon as we work our way through Romans 11. As I mentioned last time, the difficulty in preaching through Romans 9-11 is that these three chapters are one extended argument. To preach on it in small segments as we must do because of time constraints makes it difficult to see the big picture Paul is setting forth. In this sermon we will tackle the first 15 verses of Romans 11, and Lord willing, we will pick up where we left off in the next sermon and complete our survey of this very interesting section of Romans.

The question of Israel’s role in the present age (the messianic age) also raises the question about the possibility of a future millennial age. The vast majority of premillennarians and postmillennarians contend that in this passage Paul teaches that not only is there a role for national Israel in God’s future redemptive purposes, but that this role for Israel entails a future earthly millennium. According to amillennarians, however, Paul does not specifically address the subject of a millennium in Romans 11.¹ But Paul does speak directly to the subject of the future role of Israel in God’s redemptive purposes, the only place in Scripture where he explicitly does so.² Although Paul does not tell us when the things mentioned in this passage will come to pass, he clearly links them to Israel’s eschatological fullness and to the end of the age.³ Although amillennarians disagree among themselves about whether or not Israel does have a future place in redemptive history—some say Israel does have a role (Geerhardus Vos, David Holwerda and Cornelis Venema),⁴ while some say there is no distinctive future role for ethnic Israel

¹ Geerhardus Vos, The Pauline Eschatology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 90 n.16.

² David E. Holwerda, Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two? (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 151.

³ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 696.

⁴ Cf. Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, pp. 87-91; Holwerda, Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?, pp. 147-176, and Cornelius Venema, The Promise of the Future (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2000), pp. 127-139. Although he holds the opposite view, Herman Ridderbos’ reply to G. C. Berkouwer is also frequently cited in this debate: “it seems to me that Berkouwer, in the Return of Christ, takes altogether

(Calvin, William Hendricksen, Anthony Hoekema and Bob Strimple)⁵—neither camp sees this issue as determinative of one’s millennial view.⁶ While some post-holocaust Jewish writers, as well as certain evangelicals, have argued that denying a place for a distinct future for ethnic Israel and equating the church with Israel is at the root of contemporary anti-Semitism,⁷ it must be pointed out that even those Reformed amillennarians who do not see a distinct future for ethnic Israel, have held out the likelihood of the conversion of large numbers of ethnic Jews to Christianity before the return of Christ.⁸

The most popular interpretation of this passage is that of dispensationalists, who teach that “in Romans 11 it is shown that God has taken the nation of Israel out of the place of blessing temporarily, but will restore them to that place of blessing when His program for the church is terminated.”⁹

Dispensationalists believe that after the secret Rapture when the Gentile church is removed from the earth and the tribulation begins, God will go back to dealing with national Israel once again.¹⁰ They believe that when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, Israel’s hardness of heart is taken away and the seventieth week of Daniel’s prophecy begins. For dispensationalists, the future role for Israel described in Romans 11 supposedly guarantees Israel’s place in the kingdom of God as well as fulfilling the covenantal promise of a land that God made to Abraham.¹¹ This is why dispensationalists are able to

too little account of the future elements in Paul’s pronouncements” in Romans 11. See Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, p. 1975), p. 359, n. 71.

⁵ See William Hendriksen, Israel in Prophecy (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1974); G. C. Berkouwer, The Return of Christ (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 323-358; Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, pp. 145-147; O. Palmer Robertson, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?,” in Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., Perspectives on Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 209-227; and Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, pp. 112-118. This is the so-called “Dutch School,” even though all of those listed who defend the opposite view are also Dutch.

⁶ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, p. 113.

⁷ See Holwerda, Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?, pp. 1-26.

⁸ Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, pp. 146-147; Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, p. 112-118; O. P. Robertson, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?” in Kantzer and Gundry, eds., Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, p. 215. It should be noted that Robertson has since changed his views regarding the meaning of the phrase “all Israel,” and now understands the phrase to mean the full number of the elect, Jew and Gentile. See O. Palmer Robertson, The Israel of God (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2000), pp. 167-192.

⁹ Pentecost, Things to Come, pp. 88-89.

¹⁰ Pentecost, Things to Come, p. 247.

¹¹ S. Lewis Johnson, “Evidence from Romans 9-11,” in Campbell & Townsend, A Case for Premillennialism, pp. 199-223.

look to the land promises in the Abrahamic covenant as still applying to the nation of Israel, ungirding their argument for the necessity of a future millennial kingdom. This is also why dispensationalists so ardently defend the proposition that ethnic Israel has a future in God's economy against those amillennarians who do not see a future role for ethnic Israel. But if it can be shown from this text that "all Israel" refers to the full number of the elect (Calvin's view),¹² or the sum total of all "true Israelites" (Hoekema/Strimple)¹³ and not national Israel, the case for dispensational premillennialism is seriously weakened.¹⁴ On dispensational presuppositions, if one can prove a future for national Israel, one proves the premillennial interpretation of the kingdom. The fact that in 1948 Israel became a nation and was returned to the land of Abraham, seems to lend this view great credibility and explains why dispensationalists are so preoccupied with current events in the Middle East.

But as Stanley Grenz points out, "this hope" for the future role of Israel does not require "an earthly millennial reign of Christ, for the conversion of Israel could just as easily prepare for the inauguration of the eternal state as for an earthly golden age."¹⁵ From an amillennial perspective, the future role of Israel in Romans 11—whatever that should be—plays no role whatsoever in the determination of one's view of the millennium. But for dispensationalists, a future role for Israel and the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant is essential to an earthly kingdom which comes to fruition in a future millennial age.

George Ladd, perhaps the leading premillennarian, takes a markedly different approach to the passage from that of the dispensationalists. Ladd's view is that Israel does have a distinct role in future of redemptive history. Ladd understands Paul's argument in Romans 11 as follows. It is the present rejection of Israel which leads to the message of reconciliation going out to the Gentile world. But Israel's future restoration, connected by Paul to the resurrection from the dead, will bring countless new blessings to the Gentiles. "Paul does not here tell us when or how this era of blessing will occur," says Ladd. Neither "does Paul explain how the salvation of Israel is accomplished." It is clear, however, that Israel's salvation must come to pass in the same way in which salvation has come to Gentiles, "through saving faith in Jesus as the crucified Messiah."¹⁶ Furthermore, once the nation is converted, Israel will not have a separate theological existence, but believing Jews will be brought into the church. Ladd concludes by pointing out that "Paul does not add here the thought that through this salvation of Israel, a

¹² Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, p. 255; Cf. Robertson, The Israel of God, pp. 188-189.

¹³ Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, p. 145.

¹⁴ The importance of this to the defense of premillennialism can be seen when S. Lewis Johnson sets up a false dilemma by arguing that "if ethnic Israel has a future in biblical teaching, then how is it possible to deny to her a certain preeminence in the kingdom of God?" See Johnson, "Evidence from Romans 9-11," in Campbell & Townsend, A Case for Premillennialism, p. 212.

¹⁵ Grenz, The Millennial Maze, p. 171.

¹⁶ George Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 608.

new wave of life will come to the whole world; his concern at this point is only the destiny of Israel.”¹⁷ This view not only flies in the face of both dispensational and postmillennial interpretations of the passage, it is a view that provokes the wrath of certain dispensationalists, who accuse fellow premillennarian Ladd of the greatest of interpretive sins, “spiritualizing the text.”¹⁸

A future role for national Israel is also essential to postmillennialism.¹⁹ According to postmillennarians, Romans 11 is a depiction of the conversion of Israel which marks the beginning of the future millennial age in which the nations of the earth are effectively Christianized. John Jefferson Davis explains that “Paul thus looks forward to a time when the nation of Israel will recognize her true Messiah and enjoy the blessings of salvation in Jesus Christ.”²⁰ This is cited as evidence of the great missionary success for the church indicative of the Christianizing of the nations. Some postmillennarians see Paul’s reference to the fullness of the Gentiles in verse 25 as a proof-text for the postmillennial expectation that “the entire Gentile world will be converted to faith in Jesus Christ” . . . and that “the conversion of Israel will result in an era of great blessings for the entire world.”²¹ Postmillennialists do not believe that this entails the conversion of each and every Jew and Gentile, but the postmillennial vision does see the vast majority of the world’s inhabitants coming to faith in Jesus Christ. When Paul speaks of the salvation of Israel and the fulness of the Gentiles, this is taken as evidence in favor of the postmillennial position.

Before we turn to the passage, several matters which specifically relate to the millennial question need to be considered. For one thing, the passage is quite remarkable for what it *doesn’t* say. There is absolutely no mention by Paul of a return of the Jews to the promised land, nor do we find any reference to a millennial kingdom typical of dispensationalism in which Jesus rules the earth as a Davidic king during an earthly millennium. Nor do we find any reference made by Paul to a postmillennial “golden-age” in which the world will be Christianized, despite postmillennial claims to the contrary.²² One would certainly think that since Paul is addressing the subject of Israel’s future, and if Israel’s future entailed the things dispensationalists and postmillennarians claim that it does, this would be the ideal time for

¹⁷ Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, p. 608; Cf. George Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in Robert G. Clouse, ed., The Meaning of the Millennium (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), where Ladd writes, there are “unavoidable indications that the Old Testament promises to Israel are fulfilled in the Christian church. The alert reader will say, ‘This sounds like amillennialism’” (p. 27).

¹⁸ Johnson, “Evidence from Romans 9-11,” in Campbell & Townsend, A Case for Premillennialism, pp. 206-207.

¹⁹ See the commentaries by: Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, pp. 353-382; Robert Haldane, Commentary on Romans (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), pp. 530-560.

²⁰ John Jefferson Davis, The Victory of Christ’s Kingdom (Moscow ID: Canon Press, 1996), p. 62. Davis also makes the point there is no mention by Paul here of a restored Davidic kingdom, a telling weakness in the dispensational interpretation of the passage.

²¹ David Chilton, Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), pp. 129-131.

²² Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, p. 113.

Paul to mention them. But he does not. Whatever role ethnic Israel will or will not play in the future has no direct bearing on the millennial question when viewed from an amillennial perspective. Paul limits his discussion to Israel's future and that future is no way tied to an earthly millennium.

Paul is not the only New Testament writer to speak of Israel's barrenness. The spiritual condition of Israel is a theme we find throughout the Gospel and Acts, when it is made plain that the covenant curses have come upon Israel because she has rejected her Messiah. When the Gospels and Acts were written, Israel stood squarely under the judgment of God. What the writers of the Gospels and Acts do not address is the question of Israel's future status, i.e., the question of whether the present condition of curse will give way to a time of future blessing when ethnic Israel will once again be restored to God's favor. It falls to Paul to speak directly to the subject of Israel's future in Romans 9-11.

There is much more at stake in this discussion than the matter of Israel. Ultimately, this is a question of God's faithfulness. These three chapters have been called Paul's "apologetic" for the faithfulness of God in the face of the accusation that God had not fulfilled his promises to Israel.²³ In Romans 9:3-5, Paul recounts how Israel has received countless blessings from God; the covenants, the patriarchs, the law, adoption as sons and the temple. From Israel comes the human ancestry of Christ. Therefore, as we have seen, the critical question here is, "If the gospel goes first to the Jew and only then to the Greek, how is it that Israel did not embrace the Messiah through faith?" Why is Israel now under God's judgment, instead of his blessing? Has God not kept his promises? Has he changed his purpose?

Paul's answer is that God *is* faithful. His word has not failed. The interpretive key to all of this is the second clause of verse 6, when Paul says, "not all Israel is Israel." It is here that Paul introduces an important distinction between "Israel" in a broader sense ("all Israel") and Israel in a narrower sense ("not all Israel"). Paul's point is simply this. God has been faithful to this more narrowly defined Israel, frequently spoken of by commentators as "spiritual" Israel in contrast to "physical" Israel²⁴ or "true Israel," in contrast to "Jewish Israel."²⁵ It is true Israel, which has been the object of his mercy and which has been chosen to be recipients of God's amazing grace.²⁶ The critical question at this juncture is who composes "true Israel?" True Israel may refer to the messianic community, both Jew and Gentile who believe in Christ. In Galatians 4:28, Paul speaks of all Christians as children of promise, like Abraham. In Philippians 3:3, all Christians (Gentiles included) are called "the circumcision." In Galatians 6:16, Paul explicitly calls the church "the Israel of God." Furthermore, in Romans 4:1-16, Paul has already spoken of all who believe, Jew and Gentile, as children of Abraham.²⁷

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that in Romans 11, Paul is speaking of "true Israel," as a distinct group within the larger body of ethnic Jews (national Israel). The context in Romans 9-11 is a

²³ Strimple, "Amillennialism," in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, p. 114.

²⁴ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 572-576.

²⁵ Holwerda, Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?, pp. 154-155.

²⁶ Charles Cranfield points out that the key word in the passage is mercy, occurring seven times in these chapters. Cranfield, The Epistle to the Romans, II.448.

²⁷ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 573-574.

discussion of the future of ethnic Israel in light of the nation's present condition. In the first five verses of Romans 9, Paul focused upon the blessings God gave to Israel throughout her long and illustrious history. Furthermore, in what follows, Paul explains the difference between the larger and narrower body, in terms which strictly apply to ethnic Israel. It is also important to notice that throughout this section, Paul carefully distinguishes between Israel and Gentiles, as in Romans 9:24, where God's purposes for elect Jews is both compared and contrasted with elect Gentiles. Finally, the citations taken from Isaiah (Isaiah 10:22-23; 1:9) in Romans 9:27-29, are passages which refer to a believing remnant within Israel.²⁸ This is why I understand Paul's reference to a narrower body ("not" all Israel) within all Israel (ethnic Israel) to refer to a remnant of believing Jews within the larger body of non-believing ethnic Jews. Based upon this distinction, "true Israel" (Romans 9:6) must be the same body as the "believing remnant" of Romans 11:5. The reference to "all Israel" in Romans 11:26, must refer to ethnic Israel, the broader group, if Paul uses these terms consistently throughout the course of his argument.²⁹ I believe that he does. All Israel means national Israel in Romans 9:6, just as it does in Romans 11:26.

The distinction between a broader and a narrower Israel is seen in this section of Paul's discussion of the future role of Israel, when Paul makes a distinction between those who are Jews by birth (biological children of Abraham, through the line of Jacob), and those who are Jews by virtue of faith in Christ (children of the promise). Therefore, "true Israel," stands over against ethnic Israel, who, while biological descendants of Abraham, are not true children of Abraham. Paul puts it this way in Romans 9:7-8; *"nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children....It is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."* Who are these children of promise? These are the recipients of God's grace. Therefore, "all that true Israel can ever say about its existence as God's people is that it was chosen by God and is the recipient of his love and mercy."³⁰ This remarkable emphasis upon divine mercy becomes clear in Romans 9:10-24, when Paul describes the election of Jacob and the divine passing over of Esau based upon God's sovereign purposes and not because of anything good God sees within either individual. As Paul puts it in verse 16, *"it does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."*

If, in Romans 9, Paul establishes the principle of salvation based upon divine election—not foreseen faith or good works—as well as the principle that there remains an elect remnant within ethnic Israel, then, in Romans 10, the apostle hammers home the point that there is but one gospel and that the believing remnant of Israel will be delivered from the guilt and power of sin in the exact same manner as have the believing Gentiles. Israel's problem, says Paul, is not a lack of zeal. It is a lack of knowledge. As a result, Israel sought to establish a righteousness of its own through works of law rather than through receiving the righteousness of Christ through faith (Romans 10:2-4). Though the gospel was preached to them, *"not all the Israelites accepted the message"* (v. 16) This was part of the divine purpose so that as Gentiles come to faith in Israel's God, they might in turn provoke Israel to envy.

²⁸ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 574.

²⁹ Contra, Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, p. 145 and N. T. Wright, Climax of the Covenant (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 248-251.

³⁰ Holwerda, Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?, p. 155.

This brings us to Romans chapter 11 and the critical question in the opening verse, “*has God rejected his people?*” This theme, in fact, dominates the entire chapter.³¹

In verses 1-2, Paul now deals with national Israel in relation to the existence of a believing remnant within the broader group. “*I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.*” Notice Paul’s answer to his own rhetorical question: Did God reject his people? Paul’s answer—Absolutely not! Paul is a Jew—a descendant of Abraham and he believes the promise. There is at least one Jewish believer in Jesus Christ. Paul takes this as proof that God has not broken his promise.

As is his custom, Paul appeals to the Old Testament (1 Kings 19:10-14—a text we read earlier in this series) to bolster his point that God always preserves an elect remnant in times of apostasy. Beginning in the latter half of verse 2, Paul recounts the story of Elijah. “*Don’t you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me’? And what was God’s answer to him? ‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’*” In one of Israel’s darkest hours, God preserved a believing remnant. The same is true when Paul writes this letter. Says Paul in verses 5-6, “*So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*”

In light of Paul’s question about the fate of ethnic Israel, the very fact that Paul is both a Jew and a believer in Jesus Christ makes clear what his answer to the question will be. No, God has not cast off his people, because even now there is an elect remnant according to grace (v. 5). This means that God is not finished with Israel.³² With the emphatic answer Paul gives to that question, “*May it never be, I am an Israelite myself!*” it is important not to prejudice the answer by asking the wrong question. The question is not “does Israel have any future?” but “has God already cast Israel off?” The rhetorical question and the immediate answer, tell us clearly, “no, God has not rejected Israel.” As proof of this, Paul appeals to his own status as a Jew who also believes in Jesus Christ, and this, it is argued, means that “Romans 11 deals with the place of Israel in the redemptive purposes of God at the present time, not at some future time.”³³ But I, for one, am not so sure that Paul’s initial focus upon Israel’s present situation prevents him from also focusing upon Israel’s future later in the same chapter.³⁴

Since Paul offers himself and other Jewish Christians as proof of the fact that God has not cast off ethnic Israel, “we err if we assume that the significance of the remnant pertains only to the elect individuals who

³¹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 671.

³² The question is not to be understood in the sense of, “Has God cast off ethnic Israel with respect to his special plan for the future?” But rather, “has God cast-off ethnic Israel altogether?” Robertson, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?” in Kantzer and Gundry, eds., Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, p. 213.

³³ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, p. 115.

³⁴ That Paul is focusing on the present is a point made repeatedly by Robertson in, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?” in Kantzer and Gundry, eds., Perspectives on Evangelical Theology.

constitute the remnant. Paul is not implying that the remnant alone is Israel and no one else.”³⁵ The fact that a remnant still exists is no insignificant matter. For Paul, this is the proof that God has not cast off Israel entirely. In fact, such a contention undergirds the largely apologetic argument about God’s faithfulness. This is why “Paul points to himself and other Jewish Christians as evidence that God has not withdrawn his grace from Jewish Israel. The existence of a believing remnant is a sign that God is still faithful to his election of Jewish Israel.” Despite his own personal despair over Israel’s condition, “Paul himself is a hopeful sign that God has not rejected his disobedient people because Paul also was in an active state of disobedience when God’s grace was given to him.”³⁶

Even as God had miraculously transformed Paul from the most ferocious of wolves into the tameest of sheep, God can do the same with ethnic Israel despite her present unbelief. The arch-persecutor of Christ’s church is now the apostle to the Gentiles. This gives Paul hope for his people and explains why the apostle immediately goes on to state that a remnant has been chosen by grace, hence, if by grace, then not by works (v. 6). The point being that because of his grace and mercy, God may yet transform this stubborn and obstinate nation into a people who embrace the promise. This has been the case with Paul. It has been the case with the Gentiles. It may yet be the case with Israel.

But in verses 7-10, Paul must deal with the grim reality of the present situation. *“What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.’ And David says: ‘May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.’”* The elect—the remnant chosen by grace, including the apostle Paul—have obtained the promise, but the others (national Israel) were hardened. The verdict of the prophets has come to pass. *“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so they could not hear to this very day.”* Paul knows that what the prophets foretold is now a reality. Israel is barren. And it cuts him to the quick.

Beginning in verse 11, Paul begins to wrap up his discussion of Israel’s future role in redemptive history, once again addressing Israel’s present condition, only this time the apostle does so in the light of the redemptive-historical implications that Israel’s present situation has for the Gentiles. *“Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”* Israel’s present barrenness has brought great blessing to the Gentiles. That Israel has stumbled has been for a purpose.

A very clear pattern now begins to emerge in these verses, a kind of redemptive-historical pendulum swing between the glorious blessings of God’s mercy which extend first to the Gentiles, and which, in

³⁵ Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?*, p. 164.

³⁶ Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?*, p. 164.

turn, rebound to the Jews, only to rebound back again to the Gentiles.³⁷ The key question for interpreters of Romans 11 to resolve is whether or not this rebound is to be understood as a pattern limited to “true Israel” throughout the age, or a process which reaches a climax in the salvation of “ethnic Israel” immediately before the return of Christ.

In verse 11, we are told that while Israel has stumbled, Israel has not fallen. This is a very important indication that the present judgment upon the nation is less than final. Because of Israel’s sin, salvation comes to the Gentiles. And Gentile salvation, in turns, will make Israel envious. In verse 12, this rebound pattern continues. This time, Israel’s sin is described as bringing blessings to the Gentiles, while Israel’s loss becomes the Gentile’s gain. But as the redemptive historical pendulum swings back the other way, Israel’s fullness, will, in turn, serve to bring only greater riches to the Gentiles.³⁸

In verse 15, Paul’s redemptive-historical pendulum swing between blessings for Gentiles and Israel continues. This time Paul writes, “*if Israel’s rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be, but life from the dead?*” How can Paul equate Israel’s future acceptance with the resurrection? John Murray has interpreted Paul’s phrase “life from the dead” as a figurative expression of an unprecedented time of gospel expansion which results from “the reception of Israel again into the favour and blessing of God.”³⁹ Postmillennarians have seized upon this interpretation and have argued that a future reversal of Israel’s present fortune is an argument in favor of Israel’s conversion marking the dawn of an era of unprecedented blessings for the whole world.⁴⁰ But this argument is ultimately self-refuting. If the fullness of the Gentiles and the fullness of Israel has *already* been ushered in, how could a golden-age follow with even greater fullness?⁴¹ And there is yet another reason the postmillennial interpretation is highly problematic. Israel’s acceptance does not mark the beginning of a golden-age. Israel’s conversion is a sign that this present evil age is about to come to an end with the resurrection.

³⁷ See, for example, Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology, pp. 354-361. Cf. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 684.

³⁸ The meaning of Israel’s fullness [*pleroma*] is a hotly debated point. Robertson’s argument to the effect that Israel’s fullness was a current condition when Paul wrote the epistle seems strained, especially in light of the context, which is the contrast with Israel’s loss [i.e. Israel’s numerical diminution]. It seems to me that the context indicates that Paul is speaking of a time when Israel’s present diminution gives way to great increase. I take this to be a reference to a future restoration of Israel’s present loss. Cf. Robertson, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?” in Kantzer and Gundry, eds., Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, pp 214-216; and Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 688-690.

³⁹ Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 80-84. This is the view of Hodge and Haldane.

⁴⁰ Chilton, Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion, p. 131.

⁴¹ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, p. 118. Kenneth Gentry’s reply to Strimple’s argument is to simply reaffirm the postmillennial contention without exegetical support to the effect that there is a golden-age entailing the salvation of the majority of the world’s inhabitants yet to follow the fullness of Israel and the Gentiles. For Paul, the fullness of Israel is connected to the eschaton, not a millennial age. Cf. Kenneth L. Gentry, “A Postmillennial Response,” in Bock, ed., Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond, p. 141.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the best interpretation of Israel's acceptance being connected to life from the dead is the traditional one. This view holds that Israel's acceptance is in some way connected to the general resurrection at the end of the age.⁴² As Douglas Moo points out, "Therefore, as Israel's trespass (vv. 11, 12) and `rejection' (v. 15) trigger the stage in salvation history in which Paul (and we) are located, a stage in which God is specifically blessing Gentiles, so Israel's `fullness' (v. 12) and `acceptance' (v. 15) will trigger the climatic end of salvation history."⁴³ This places the time of Israel's acceptance *immediately* before the return of Christ and the bodily resurrection. As Barrett puts it, "the full conversion of Israel therefore stands on the boundary of history."⁴⁴ Geerhardus Vos sees the conversion of Israel and its connection to the general resurrection as "the beginning of the closing act of the eschatological drama."⁴⁵ This is a major obstacle to both "pre" and "post" millennialism, which see this acceptance of Israel as connected to a future millennial age. For Paul, the conversion of Israel, (her fullness) is the herald of the consummation soon to come. The acceptance of Israel and the resurrection at the end of the age are inextricably linked. When Israel is converted, the end of the age is at hand.

Further evidence that Paul is addressing the subject of a future for ethnic Israel, can be drawn from Paul's assertion in verse 16 to the effect that there is an important theological relationship between the present harvest—i.e., the conversion of Jews to faith in Jesus Christ, i.e. the believing remnant—and the eschatological hope for ethnic Israel.⁴⁶ A subject to which we will turn next time. But as Paul sees things, the present remnant of Jewish believers make up the first fruits of a much larger harvest. "Just as Jesus Christ, as the first fruits of those who have died, represents and guarantees the resurrection of those who belong to him (1 Corinthians 15:23), so the elect remnant of Jewish Israel represents and assures the eschatological salvation of Jewish Israel."⁴⁷ The presence of a believing remnant, then, guarantees a future conversion of Israel.

Thus Paul will connect this eschatological hope to the covenant as seen in the fact the root—Abraham and the patriarchs—remains holy, not because of works-righteousness or human merit, but because the root itself is holy, grounded in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. This will be the topic of our sermon next week. Therefore, even though ethnic Israel is presently disobedient and has fallen under God's curse, if God chooses to re-graft the members of ethnic Israel back into the righteous root, even the disobedient members of ethnic Israel can be reckoned as "righteous." This is what God has done with the Gentiles when he justified the ungodly (Romans 4:5). God can do the same with ethnic Israel if he so wishes, since none of this depends upon human righteousness, but upon God's electing grace and mercy.

Will there be a role for Israel in the future? Quite likely, yes there will be. If we understand Paul

⁴² See for example: Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 692-696; Cranfield, The Epistle to the Romans, II.561-563; Schreiner, Romans, pp. 597-599.

⁴³ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 696.

⁴⁴ Barrett, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 215.

⁴⁵ Vos, The Pauline Eschatology, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁶ Holwerda, Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?, p. 167.

⁴⁷ Holwerda, Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?, p. 167.

correctly, he is saying that immediately before the end of the age, huge numbers of ethnic Jews will come to faith in Jesus Christ and become members of Christ's church. Their conversion will herald the coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the age. In Paul's day Israel had indeed stumbled with only an elect remnant remaining. But the presence of an elect remnant is the guarantee that Israel did not fall beyond recovery. For one day, Israel's promised fulness will come, and Israel's fulness will bring great blessings to the Gentiles nations. Until that day, let us join with Paul in the impassioned prayer of Romans 10:1: *"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved."*