

¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew... ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

³³O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways!

³⁴"For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵"Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?"

³⁶For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen.

Paul writes this letter to the Christian community at Rome less than thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. His purpose in writing is to introduce himself, for although he has traveled widely through the areas of what is now Turkey and Greece, he has not yet been to Rome. His plans are to stop in Rome on his way to Spain, so he writes this letter to explain to the Roman Christians his understanding of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. The Christian community in Rome is made up of both Jewish Christians like himself, and non-Jewish, or Gentile, Christians.

Paul's line of reasoning at the beginning of the letter is fairly easy to follow. Point 1 is that all human beings are sinful and are therefore not "righteous" - they are not faithful to the covenant God made with them and are therefore not in a proper relationship with God. Point 2 is that in spite of Point 1, God *is* righteous - God *is* faithful to God's promises and has demonstrated this righteousness by the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Point 3 is that we are made righteous not by what we do or don't do, but solely by faith, by trust, in what God has done in Jesus.

The affirmation that God can be trusted to keep God's promises is central to Paul's understanding of the gospel, but that forces him to address the question, "What about the promises that God made to Abraham and Moses and David?" The descendants of Abraham are God's chosen people, and Paul is part of the people of Israel. But Paul knows the reality is that many, if not most, of his fellow Jews do not recognize Jesus to be messiah, the savior of the world. If the blessing God promised to Abraham and his descendants -- a blessing Paul knows to have been fulfilled in Christ (Romans 4:23-25) - if that blessing is rejected by those descendants, then God's redemptive word has been defeated. And if God's word can be defeated by Israel's rejection, then what assurance can anyone have of God's promises? How can we know that God's redemptive word, spoken in Christ, may not also eventually fail for us? How can we be sure that the promise God makes to us in baptism is trustworthy? That is what is at stake here in chapters 9, 10, and 11 - can God be trusted to keep God's promises or not?

Paul's line of reasoning is quite methodical. His main point in chapter 9 is that the existence of a chosen people, a true Israel, is not a matter of biological descent, but a matter of the continuing gracious election of God. Being a member of the chosen people is not a matter of genetics or parentage, but a matter of God's gracious promise. Therefore, God's purpose of blessing all humanity through an elect people cannot be derailed when some of those who are biologically part of that people reject that purpose. The destiny of the chosen people is a matter of God's election, and God's power is such that no human failure, no matter how great, can derail God's redemptive plan.

Paul's main point in chapter 10 is that the people of Israel have misunderstood the purpose for which God gave them the law. When God gave the law to Moses and the rest of Abraham's descendants, it was not as a means for them to become acceptable to God. God had already elected them to be his chosen people. But human nature tends to think we have to "do" something in order for God to love us. We figure that doing the right things, keeping the law, is the means by which we become righteous before God. When we understand the law in this way, it becomes a stumbling block in our relationship with God, for it assumes our righteousness is based on us. And that, says Paul, is self-idolatry-- making ourselves god. God isn't necessary in that scenario. We assume it's all about us and what we do or don't do. Not surprisingly, says Paul, God rejects this righteousness based on us and what we do, and gives us another way - a righteousness based on trust in God and God's promises in Jesus Christ.

If Israel rejects this new righteousness based on trust, or faith, then it would seem the only conclusion is that God has rejected Israel, his chosen people, and that this rejection is final. Paul had earlier said that a righteousness based on the law leads to death (separation from God) while a righteousness based on faith leads to life (a positive relationship with God). There is no third option.

So Paul begins chapter 11 with the million-dollar question: Has God rejected God's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham? And the answer he gives is an emphatic "No!" He then explains his reasoning.

First, he notes that there exists a remnant of Israel that is not rejected for they *have* accepted Jesus as the messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises. Being a Jew himself, Paul is part of this remnant, as are the disciples and thousands of other Jewish Christians spread from Jerusalem to Rome.

Second, Paul asserts that God hardened the hearts of Israel in order that the gospel would be brought to the Gentiles. His reasoning is that if all the people of Israel had accepted Jesus as the messiah, then Jesus would have become savior not of the whole world, but of the Jews only. It is fitting for this discussion that our gospel reading this morning is the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. She was a foreigner, a Gentile, not part of the people of Israel, and Jesus' first response to her request for help is, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." By Jesus' own admission, the Jews have first claim on him. Her persistence in faith and Jesus' ultimate acceptance of her is one of the first hints that Jesus is going to have significance for a broader range of people than just the people of Israel.

Third, Paul expects that the realization that Gentiles are becoming part of the chosen people is going to cause the people of Israel to become jealous and will eventually lead to Israel's salvation.

To sum it all up, Paul says that the reason that God has hardened Israel against recognizing Jesus as God's Son is...grace! Grace for Gentiles, and finally, grace for Israel as well! God's plan, says Paul, runs from God choosing Israel, to his hardening the hearts of Israel to save Gentiles, and then to his saving Gentiles in order finally to save Israel.

Paul does not claim to know when or how this is all going to happen, nor does he presume to understand God's ways. He concludes with words of praise that celebrate that God is incomprehensible: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" he exclaims. "How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways!" For Paul, the fact that we can not understand why God acts as God does is the very reason why God can be trusted, for in contrast to human failings and inconstancy, God is faithful. It's as if God says to us simply, "Trust me – it will all work out."

There are actually many places in the Bible where God works in surprising and perplexing ways, a reminder to us that we should always be wary of putting God in a box, assuming that we know all the ways of God. We read these various stories one at a time, isolated from the others, so it is easy to miss how frequently God steps "out of the box" and ventures beyond the boundaries that we assume. But if you take the time to gather them all together, it is a pretty compelling list, underscoring the point that Pastor Amber made last week that, in God's eyes, there is not "them" and "us", but only "us."

When I spent a week with the Iona Community off the coast of Scotland three years ago, I was introduced to this creed, this statement of belief, that you see printed in the bulletin. This Iona creed has not officially been adopted by the wider Christian church, but I think it is consistent with Paul's understanding of the gospel that he presents in his letter to the Romans. I invite you to stand and speak it aloud with me, and then you may wish to take your bulletin or a copy of this sermon home with you, re-read it during the week and chew on it a bit, pondering if this is indeed a creed that Paul would affirm.

We believe in God who befriended a wandering people, delivering them from slavery into freedom; yet who in Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, Cyrus, Darius and many others called outsiders to be agents of God's purpose.

We believe in Jesus who was revered by Persian sages, sought and found asylum in Egypt, preached that God loved Syrians, attracted Greeks to his cause, found his first evangelist in a Samaritan, saw incomparable faith in a Roman, had his cross shouldered by a Libyan, and ascended above his native land that he might be present in all places.

We believe in the Holy Spirit who at Pentecost proved that heaven has no favored mother-tongue; who, in the baptism of an Ethiopian denied racism a foothold in faith; and who in the ancient and modern worlds founded churches in different cultures.

We believe that God is supremely known in Jesus, yet we affirm that God is present among people who do not own Christ as their Lord.

We affirm that the kingdom of God is bigger than the Church, and the love of God is beyond our understanding. We therefore celebrate that God's ways are not our ways, that God knows whom God chooses, and reserves the right to surpass all human expectation. Blessed be God forever. Amen