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All Israel Will Be Saved

BY DAVID FLEER

This article is the text of a sermon David preached at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures in May, 2000.

Reading: Romans 11:25–36

The best way to locate Rom 11:25–36 is to look for the whitest and most untouched pages in your New Testament. Who ever goes to Romans 11? When you finally locate the passage, you'll soon detect the problem. Paul says to Gentile Christians in Rom 11:25–36 that others will be saved. That's not so bad. What is problematic is what follows: Paul breaks out in a doxology. That's a difficult connection. Like a lot of invitations tacked onto the end of sermons, we're left asking, What has this doxology to do with "All Israel Will Be Saved"?

It is not that you and I are opposed to doxologies; we love doxologies. The doxology is a natural expression of gratitude to God. A police officer is shot but saved because he is wearing a bullet-proof vest. When his wife gets the news, "Shot . . . but all right . . . on his way home now," she hangs up the phone, sits down, and mouths the words, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Or in the birth room after a complicated pregnancy, having expected difficulties with the delivery, the doctor cradles the newborn and says, "Mrs. Smith you have a healthy baby girl." The overhearing father whispers, "To God be the glory; great things he has done."

Or Paul, in 1 Timothy 1. Of all sinners, he is the worst. But the grace of God is more than abundant,

and God has forgiven him through Jesus Christ, and Paul breaks out into a doxology: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God . . ."

Do you see the cause and effect? After the saving of a life, a doxology. After the miracle of birth, a doxology. After the forgiveness of sins, a doxology. It makes perfect sense: cause and effect.

What makes the doxology in Romans 11 so difficult is that the cause . . . doesn't cause a doxology! What is difficult in Romans 11 is what precedes the words of praise, what is supposed to motivate the doxology. In Romans 11 Paul informs the Gentile Christians, "All Israel will be saved."

A joke was told on us for over a century before we finally heard it around 1970. We thought it was funny. St. Peter is showing a new arrival around heaven, and in the far reaches of heaven is a drab wooden building. Out front is a sign with white background, black letters, Old English script: "The Church of Christ Meets Here."

"Shhhh," St. Peter tells the new arrival, "they think they are the only ones."

"Ha, ha, the joke is on us. Ha, ha."

Now imagine that the doctrinal boundaries of the joke are real. And imagine that you were raised in the Churches of Christ by parents who were raised in the Churches of Christ by grandparents who were raised in the Churches of Christ and that your long-departed great-uncle Harold steps outside the church building just as St. Peter and the new arrival are passing by. Uncle Harold lifts up his eyes, sees the new arrival, and asks St. Peter, "Who is this?"

Peter hems and haws and coughs and finally says, "Harold, this is a Presbyterian." Now look at Uncle Harold. Listen to Uncle Harold. Is that a doxology Uncle Harold is muttering under his breath?

"You're not the only ones," Paul says to his Gentile Christian readers. "There will be others." At our sectarian worst, we say, "Others? . . . No! God forbid!" Even at our inclusive best, we only respond politely, "Oh, how nice. Will we know any of them?" But who responds with a doxology? That's hard to fathom. "All Israel will be saved." Hmhmhmhm.

Perhaps our emotional distance with this text stems from how we read Israel. We've looked at Israel as a denomination with whom we've competed for members. We've perceived Israel as a denomination with whom we've argued over doctrinal fine points. We've taken the point of view that Israel is a denomination who has outclassed us with their architecture and their wealth and their community standing, and they've made us a little jealous. That's how we've looked at Israel.

But Israel is no denomination. According to Paul in Romans 11, Israel is the people of God,¹ whom he foreknew.² According to Paul, Israel is the cultivated olive tree, the natural tree of God.³ According to Paul, Israel is beloved for the sake of the fathers.⁴ According to Paul, Israel is gifted by God.⁵ According to Paul, Israel is called by God.⁶ In a phrase, Israel is God's people. That's Israel—God's people.

In Romans 9–11, as in the Old Testament itself, Paul rehearses God's involvement with Israel. Paul begins with the promises to the fathers—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁷ Then, out of Egypt God called his son. "With a strong hand and an outstretched arm," God delivered his people from Egyptian bondage.⁸ With hard-hearted Pharaoh in hot pursuit,⁹ God led his people through the Red Sea. And if Paul were to continue in Old Testament fashion, he would add, "God led his people through the wilderness and gave the land as a heritage even to Israel, his people. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever."¹⁰

We know what it is to be God's people: to be gifted by God and chosen by God and called by God, to be the cultivated olive tree, the natural tree of God. We know what it is to be God's people. To be perfectly honest, that is exactly how we have seen our-

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selves. We did not care that Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote the song; we adopted it as our own: "Notice we say brother and sister 'round here. . . . It's because we're a family, the family of God." At men's business meetings, or in the foyer of the church building, we'd hear, "Brother Cash volunteered to help Sister Hanson clean her gutters. . . . Where'd these tomatoes come from? They're from Sister Davis. She had an abundance and brought some for us. Isn't that just like Sister Davis? . . . Good morning, Sister Johnson. Good to see you, Brother Anderson." We were God's people and we gave each other names appropriate for the relationship we shared.

The lines of entrance into the family of God were clearly drawn. As sure as circumcision was a sign of Israel's covenant with God, so baptism was a sign of God's covenant with us. And as "an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant,"¹¹ so any male who has reached the age of accountability but has not been immersed for the forgiveness of his sins shall not be considered a member of the church with all the rights and privileges thereof; . . . he shall not lead prayer in the public assembly, nor shall he be permitted to partake of the emblems of the Lord's Supper.

Our name was clear, too. It said it all. We were Christ's church—thus, the Church of Christ. Who could improve on that? And, as Yahweh was distinctive to Israel, so Christ was distinctive to us. As Chemosh, the detestable idol of the Moabites, and Molech, the detestable idol of the Ammonites, and Baal, the detestable idol of the Canaanites, were not real gods (even though the natives said they were), so we knew that the so-called churches—the Lutherans and the Weslyans and the Episcopalians—

were not real churches (even though the natives said they were). They weren't in the Bible.

As Israel had its own covenant language—*hesed*, the steadfast love of the Lord, and *emmet*, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”¹²—so we had language distinctive to us. Why, within thirty seconds of casual conversation, we could detect who was a child of God and who was not. Say that you'd never been to Chicago, but someone claimed to be a member of the church in Chicago. With two questions you could discover if that person was a part of God's people.

“Which congregation in Chicago do you attend?” you would ask. If he said, “The First Church of Christ” or “Messiah church” or “The Berean Church” or “St. Luke's” — or “St.” anything—you would know that he wasn't a part of God's people. Now, if he gave a geographical location—Northside or Southside or Central—then there was a likelihood that he was a part of God's people. But if you had any doubt, you would need to ask only one more question: Who is the minister for this church in Chicago? If he said Reverend, then there was not a ghost of a chance that he was a part of God's people. If he said Pastor—Pastor? Why, we wouldn't allow Timothy and Titus to be pastoral, let alone some preacher in Chicago. As Israel had covenant language, so we had our own terminology. We were just doing as Alexander Campbell had taught: “Bible words for Bible things.”

As Israel was measured geographically north to south, from Dan to Beersheba, so we were measured west to east, from Abilene to Searcy. As the fathers of Israel were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our fathers were Campbell, Stone, and Lipscomb. As every Hebrew family taught their children the Shema, Deut 6:4-5—“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”—we taught our children Acts 2:38-39—“And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many

as the Lord our God shall call to himself.’”

“What advantage has Israel?” asks Paul. What advantage have God's people? What advantage has the Church of Christ? Paul answers, “Great in every respect. First, they have the oracles of God.”¹³ The oracles of God!? Did you hear that? Why, that's the title of Alexander Campbell's translation of the New Testament: *The Living Oracles*.

You've heard this story or its variation two dozen times. A man visits a church. After services he asks his host, “What did the preacher mean when he said such-and-so?” The host shrugs his shoulders and

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says, “I don't know.” The man visits another church. After services he asks his host, “What did the preacher mean when he said such-and-so?” The host shrugs his shoulders and says, “I don't know.” Then the man visits the Church of Christ. After services he asks his host, “What did the preacher mean when he said such-and-so?” The host reaches into the back seat of her car, grabs her Bible, and opens to the contested passage. The man says, “You mean you know your way around that book?” Of course she does. She participates in adult Bible studies. She helps place the newspaper ads, “Come Study with Us.” She expects book, chapter, and verse in the sermon.

Something went wrong with Israel. Something went wrong with God's people. Paul lays it out in this fashion: Israel's hearts were hardened.¹⁴ That is, their hearts were petrified, turned to rock. They became dull and insensitive. Paul says Israel was blinded to God's presence in their midst,¹⁵ and deaf to God's voice.¹⁶ Paul says Israel stumbled¹⁷ over the rock of offense, which was Jesus and his death on the cross. Paul says Israel was cut off.¹⁸ The tree was

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identity was established, we went to the Bible, hungry to support our already firm beliefs.²³

Others say we stumbled when we divided North and South, and we stayed South and became more familiar with Jim Crow than with Amos or Micah or Isaiah. We became dull to social justice and insensitive to racial equality.

Some say our hearts were hardened behind the scenes, in secret. As Jacob systematically culled the flocks of Laban, so we culled from our midst most of the right-brained males, the musicians and the artists. When did they leave?

Some say our hearts were hardened by the time Charles Sheldon published his novel, *In His Steps*. When the *Firm Foundation* reviewed the book, editor Austin McGary said, "It's not a matter of what Jesus would do, but more a question of what Jesus would not do." Which meant, of course, that he'd steer clear of instrumental music.²⁴

God was in our midst, and we did not perceive him. All the Lord's suppers—but we were more interested in who could partake, trying so desperately to make ourselves worthy that we failed to look up and recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. God was in our midst, and we did not perceive him. All the prayers ending in Jesus' name—but we were not expecting the power of God to break into our lives. God was in our midst, and we did not perceive him. All the prayers for healing—"Guide the doctor's hands"—but we were never expecting the Great Physician to work. God was in our midst, and we did not perceive him. And our movement produced a faith that was cold and philosophical and focused on human initiative.²⁵

Perhaps we were cut off because Alexander Campbell assumed God's initiative in our salvation.²⁶

But what Campbell assumed, later generations forgot.²⁷ Traditions mounted and blinded us to God's presence and God's power. Then, a prophecy came true. What Campbell said of Martin Luther became true of his own movement. Campbell critiqued Luther. He commended Luther for his translation of the Bible into German: "The Bible was brought out of prison and Luther bid it march." Luther made the Bible active in the lives of the people. But Campbell criticized, "The reformers' efforts were soon loaded with the immense burden of traditions."²⁸ Campbell's assessment of Luther's reform became a prophecy of his own reform, and it has been fulfilled in our hearing long before today. Blinded, deaf, hard hearted, and cut off!

What is to become of us? What is to become of us? Some say our plight is without hope, that there will be no Churches of Christ in thirty years. Some point to Romans 1 and say that God will give us up, that God has given us up: "God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts." And so we will have church split after church split until there will be ten thousand tiny, pathetic little congregations of a few dozen members scattered across the land, and Mac Lynn will run out of alphabet and asterisks to designate the peculiar reasons for our division. Some say, "God will give them up to the lusts of their hearts." We'll continue to major in minors and miss the forest for the trees until one day there will be a church that demands that we tithe mint, dill, and cumin, having long ago abandoned the weightier matters of the law.²⁹ But in Romans 1 Paul is talking about pagans. We are not pagans. We are God's people! Paul talks about God's people in Romans 11. In Romans 11 Paul speaks of God's people who have slipped, been deafened and blinded, whose hearts have been hardened. Here is what Paul says.

Paul says we are involved in a mystery,³⁰ which is altogether different from a problem.³¹ A problem is something that human intelligence and rational thought can work out, because it can be isolated and objectively studied. But a mystery cannot be detached and dealt with objectively and manipulated. We are involved in a mystery, Paul says. This is not a secret, once told, now known, now controlled. We are a part of a mystery that is deep and beyond our

grasp. Mysteries resist control, and mysteries resist manipulation.

The mystery that Paul shares with his Gentile Christian readers is that the hardening of the hearts of God's people is only partial and temporary.³² For Paul, the end point of salvation is the restoration of God's people, Israel.³³ How was this heard? It must have been like Abraham and Sarah's contemplating their age and barrenness. Or like the disciples' staring at the tomb on Good Friday. All evidence was against it, is against it still.

How can this be? This is the mystery of God's grace. The issue for Paul is not repentance. Repentance does not appear in Romans 11. The issue is God's grace and our response of faith. Faith, if it is to be like the faith of Romans 11, is not in human possibility: not in our rational skills that have produced more Ph.D.s per capita than any other group, nor in our arrival into the upper echelons of American finance and politics. No! We place our faith in God, believing in the mystery of God's grace. Our faith is in the God who "calls into being that which does not exist" and "gives life to the dead."³⁴

So why did God harden Israel's hearts? Why did God harden our hearts? Paul explains that God hardens hearts to push forward his gracious plans. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he might give birth to his people, Israel.³⁵ God hardened the vessels of wrath so that he might show mercy.³⁶ And God hardened Israel's hearts so that the Gentiles might be saved.³⁷ God uses rebellion and disobedience to advance his plans of mercy.

You and I know too much; we've seen too much. Our eyes have been opened. We have seen evangelicals plant churches in the inner cities, where tattooed and body-pierced and dreadlocked kids gather for worship. Our eyes have been opened. We've seen suburban churches, with no help from us, call themselves "A Modern New Testament Church." Our eyes have been opened. We've seen the Pentecostals with soup kitchens helping the poor, enacting the very essence of Jesus' concern for the hopeless and the helpless.³⁸

What Israel sought, they did not obtain.³⁹ They pursued a law of righteousness but did not arrive at that law.⁴⁰ What we sought, we did not obtain. We sought nondenominational Christianity. We sought

the unity of all believers. We sought to sacrifice human tradition for the "real world" of scripture. What we sought, we did not obtain. Yet Paul says, "All God's people will be saved." And as we were broken for our unbelief, so we will be saved by the grace of God. All God's people will be saved.

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We believe in the mystery of God. We believe that our minds are too small and our hearts are too little, so that even when we do pick up the scent of God, he moves beyond our ability to grasp him fully. We believe in the mystery of God! We believe that we are creatures and that God is our creator and that we are dependent on him. We believe that all good things come from God. We believe that we are saved and given purpose and reason for life, not by our status nor by our commitment nor by our name, but by God. We ask God to crush our efforts to make him into our image. We believe that God can, through his power, transform us into his image. We believe in Jesus Christ and him crucified. We believe that God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand. We believe that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

And so we embrace and celebrate Paul's declaration, "All God's people will be saved." Because God gives life to the dead, God will take this branch that was broken off and regraft us into his tree.

Oh, the depths of God's riches and the depths of God's love. Oh, the wonder of God's wisdom and the beauty of God's love. How unsearchable are God's judgments and unfathomable God's ways. Who has known the mind of God? For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever and ever and ever. Amen.

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(See Notes on page 171.)