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THE DESERT WILL BLOOM LIKE A ROSE

Romans 11:1-32

A friend told me he was surprised when he was talking to a younger employee at his work as they were dealing with some problems. My friend said to the young guy, “Talk to me, Goose.” The kid looked at him like he was speaking Chinese. He’d never seen the original *Top Gun* movie and had no idea what my friend was talking about. I was surprised. Doesn’t everybody know the classic lines from that classic movie? “I feel the need, the need for speed,” and “Talk to me, Goose.” Apparently, they don’t. Although my guess is, that kid knows now because he’s probably seen the new *Top Gun* movie.

Laurie and I went to see it a little over a week ago. We loved it. If you haven’t seen it and you plan to, I’m giving you a spoiler alert. You might want to leave the room for a moment, because I’m going to refer to some things that happened in the movie. The central conflict in the movie involves a seemingly impossible mission. This would seem to be right up Tom Cruise’s alley, because he also makes the *Mission Impossible* movies. Of course, you get caught up in the story as you’re watching the movie and there are some really tense moments. But I realized when it was over that it came out not much different than I expected. I had no doubt that somehow Maverick would make it all work, because that’s just who Maverick is. Of course, the mission wasn’t real, and Maverick isn’t real. But it occurred to me that life sometimes imitates art. We are going to be faced with missions that are very real and feel as intimidating, as impossible as the mission in that movie. We get caught up in them and can be daunted, fearful, even feel hopeless. Last weekend our 4 year old granddaughter, Cara, had a miserable bout with a nasty virus that caused some ugly unpleasantness in the digestive tract. She had it for several days, then handed the baton to her sister, Ella. Ella is still not quite done with it, but she has already passed the baton to the youngest sister, Bria. For poor Anna this has meant more than a week of dealing with vomiting, very sick children. Laurie, wondering where they picked the crummy bug up asked Anna where it came from. Her response was terse, but graphic. She said, “Hell.” This has felt like mission impossible week for her. But even in times like that the reality is there is someone whom we can count on far more than anyone could count on the imaginary Maverick of the movie. We will get a powerful reminder of that truth today as we look at Romans 11:1-32.

GOD HAS ALWAYS HAD A REMNANT

In verse 1 Paul asked the question, “Did God reject his people?” This is the question that he began addressing in chapter 9. It certainly looks like if what Paul has said in the first 8 chapters of this letter is true then God has, indeed, rejected his people. This is a rather large elephant sitting in God’s theological room. He called Israel his son. Would God reject his own children? At issue in this matter is the very character of God.

For a time when Laurie and I took care of our granddaughters they always wanted to watch the Disney animated movie *Encanto*. I can’t explain the plot to you because I saw pieces of it, but have never seen the whole thing. However, I know there is one song from that movie that became very popular. It is called *We Don’t Talk About Bruno*. Apparently Bruno was a member of the family whose story was kind of a dark family secret. So they sang, “We don’t talk about Bruno, no, no, no.” It would be easy for followers of Jesus to sing, “We don’t talk about Israel, no, no, no.” Israel could be kind of the family secret we don’t discuss, because God made them his chosen people, his covenant people, then he made a different covenant that brought in other people and seemed to leave Israel in the past. This raises concern with the character of God. He says in Christ we are now his children. But what if he jettisons us like he seemed to do with Israel?

Paul hits this problem head on. He would have sung, “Okay let’s talk about Israel, yes, yes, yes.” Let’s answer the question of what about Israel. Did God reject them, or is he faithful to his promises? Paul starts his answer by using an incident from the life of one of Israel’s greatest prophets, Elijah. Elijah prophesied in Israel when the northern tribes were led by one of their worst kings ever, Ahab, who was married to the infamous Jezebel. Jezebel led Ahab around by the nose and she hated the worship of Israel’s true God, Yahweh. She was a fan of the pagan god, Baal, among others. Together she and Ahab led Israel into near total abandonment of the true God. In 1 Kings 18 Elijah had what seemed to be a climactic contest with hundreds of prophets of the false gods to settle the question of who really is God once and for all. Yahweh, the true God, trounced the false gods. Elijah thought this would be the final victory, that it would end the problem caused by Ahab and Jezebel.

Much to Elijah’s dismay, he was wrong. Jezebel refused to accept the results of that election. Her response was to plan to kill the messenger. She told Elijah she was going to terminate him with extreme prejudice. She wasn’t giving up. This completely caught Elijah by surprise and sent him into a pit of depression. Scared, discouraged and despairing, he ran away. He went out into the wilderness and whined. He said to God, “I’m the only one left that’s faithful to you.” In 1 Kings 19:4 he said, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life.”

He was whining. If he was serious about being done with life he should have just stayed in Israel. Jezebel would have gladly obliged him. The fact that he ran away and whined like this tells you he just wanted to whine and complain because he was miffed.

God basically ignored his whining and gave him some marching orders. Then he said in 1 Kings 19:18, “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal.” In other words, “You think you’re the only person who is faithful to me that is left? Wrong, Whiney Boy. I reserve 7000 in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal.” In the entire nation of hundreds of thousands of people, 7000 is not a lot. But it’s lot more than 1. The point of the story is that even in what seemed to Elijah to be the worst of times, God still had people in Israel who remained faithful to him. He had thousands of them.

Paul used that story as an example. Yes, the majority of the Jews in his day and now, were rejecting Jesus Christ. But not all of them. Just like in Elijah’s day, God had his faithful cadre remaining. There were many Jewish people who believed in Messiah Jesus. Paul was one of them. All of the apostles were Jewish followers of Jesus. There were thousands of other Jewish believers in Jesus. Then and now, God had faithful ones remaining.

God was still being faithful to his people, Israel. It’s just that the real Israel are those who believe God, who trust in his promise, who believe in the Messiah, Jesus. God has not rejected any of them. That is still true today. Years ago I was asked to help officiate at the wedding in Colorado of a young man from our church. The wedding proved to be the most unique wedding I’ve ever done. That’s because it was a Jewish wedding. I don’t get asked to do a lot of those. The man from our church was marrying a Jewish woman. They went through all the Jewish wedding traditions. They had a huppah, which is a wedding canopy. Before they came to the huppah the bride circled the groom 7 times. The ceremony included signing the ketubah, which is a document of commitment. They broke the traditional glass. At the reception they danced the Hora, which I thought would never end. I wasn’t the only one officiating. I did my part alongside not one, but two rabbis and a cantor, who sang part of the service in Hebrew. They prayed prayers in Hebrew. Here’s what’s really cool about it. The bride was a Jewish follower of Jesus. Both of her parents were Jewish followers of Jesus. The two rabbis and the cantor were all followers of Jesus. We were all brothers and sisters in Christ. They were part of a church made of mostly Jewish followers of Jesus. It was, for me, a vivid and encouraging reminder that God still has a faithful remnant.

A recent article in *Atlantic* magazine estimated that there are between 10,000 and 20,000 believers in Jesus in Israel today, so there is a bigger remnant in Israel today than in Elijah’s day. Our daughter in law, Anna, works for a company whose owner is a Jewish follower of Jesus who lives in Israel. Worldwide that remnant is far bigger. That number is around 350,000.

GOD USED ISRAEL’S FAILURE FOR THE GENTILES’ GOOD

In verse 12 Paul said of the Jewish people, “If their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring?” In verse 15 he wrote, “If their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”

From the very beginning of the Jewish people, it was God’s intent to use them to bless the rest of the world. When God called Abraham and promised to make a great nation from his descendants, he said in Genesis 12:3, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” He has indeed blessed the world through having the Messiah, the Savior of all, be a descendant of Abraham. But it could easily have happened that believing in Jesus could have been seen purely as a sect of Judaism, because in a sense it is. In fact, that is how the Roman government mostly viewed Christianity at first. But as Gentiles began believing in Jesus, the Jewish people mostly began rejecting him. This made it more clear to Gentiles that following Jesus was something different than merely another form of the Jewish religion, and that made it easier for Gentiles like us to enter into God’s kingdom.

In verses 17-24 Paul used the illustration of grafting branches on trees as an analogy for bringing Gentiles into the people of God. I find it strange that you can actually take a branch from one tree and attach it to another tree and have it grow and become part of the tree. I do not speak from personal experience here because I have never grafted a tree in my life. But I’m told this happens all the time. I read that you can take a branch from a nectarine tree and graft it onto a peach tree. The nectarine branch will grow and produce nectarines while the rest of the tree produces peaches.

Paul said in these verses that the root tree is Israel. In verse 18 he said to Gentile believers in Jesus, “You do not support the root, but the root supports you.” That’s pretty easy to see. All of the Old Testament is about the Jewish people. It was from them that Messiah came. All of the first followers of Jesus, the founders of the church, were Jewish. We who are Gentile have been grafted on to that root. We owe our faith, our acceptance in the Kingdom of God, to the Jewish people.

GOD IS NOT FINISHED WITH ISRAEL

Beginning in verse 25 we see the final part of Paul’s answer to the question of whether God has rejected his people, and it is a significant one. He says in verses 25-26, “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved.” The reason, he says in verse 29 is, “God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.” In other words, God doesn’t take back his gifts. He doesn’t nullify his promises to his people. He promised some things to them, and he keeps his promises.

In other words, Paul said, “Yes, much, though not all, of Israel is rejecting the Messiah. But this is only for a time. God’s calling of them to be his people is forever. It has not changed. There will be a time in the future when all Israel will be saved.” Paul wasn’t using the word “all” to mean every last individual. He’s using it generically, to mean as a whole, Israel will turn and believe in Jesus. It’s kind of like when we say, “The whole world is watching what’s happening in Ukraine.” It doesn’t mean every single person without exception is watching. It means generally it is widely watched by most people. Paul meant generally Israel in large part will put their faith in Jesus Christ at some point. Paul is telling us that there will be a time when Israel will have a mass movement in the direction of believing in Jesus. This is going to happen near the time of his return. It will be the final manifestation of God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Israel.

When will this happen? Verse 25 says it is when “the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” Literally Paul wrote this will occur when “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” The original text does not use the word number at all. I think of it as this will happen when the day of the Gentiles is complete. The crucial point here is that a time is coming when the Jewish people will begin putting their faith in Jesus Christ in mass numbers, when the large majority will believe in him.

God is not done working with the physical nation of Israel, his chosen people. Even now we can see hints of that in our world. Less than 80 years ago if you had looked at a map of the world there would have been no nation of Israel on it. There had been no such nation for nearly 1900 years. But as we all know, the map of the world today does have the nation of Israel on it. In 1948, following the horror of the Holocaust in World War 2, the United Nations carved out a small sliver of land at the east end of the Mediterranean and declared that it belonged to the Jewish people. In the years that followed that nation has expanded its territory.

For many years, for centuries, some people disregarded many of the prophecies of the future in the Bible because they referred to Israel when that nation had long since ceased to exist. No one could see how Israel could somehow come into being again. But that is no longer true, for Israel does exist. What has happened there is unheard of. God indeed is not done with the Jewish nation.

Isaiah 35:1-2 says, “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom.” That’s an accurate translation, but I like the old King James translation which says the desert will bloom like a rose. Laurie used to have a bunch of rose bushes along our back fence. I’ve never been a huge fan of rose bushes, but when those things blossomed, it was spectacular. It was a beautiful riot of color. Isaiah says that’s the picture of what will happen to Israel. Today in the desert of Israel there are date palm groves, orchards of fruit trees, crops growing in places that 50 years ago were nothing but empty, arid desert. Isaiah 27:6 says, “In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.” Today the nation of Israel exports fruit, especially citrus fruits, all over the world.

Are we near the time of Christ’s return when Israel will experience fullness again? I have no idea. Despite the claims of some preachers that they know this is true, the fact is no one knows. Jesus said so, and personally I think it wise to trust what he said rather than any preacher who is trying to draw a big crowd. What we do know is that the events that have taken place in the past 70 plus years are evidence that God is still working with his people Israel. He is going to fulfill his covenant with them when they turn to him and trust in Christ.

In short, the answer to the question of whether God has rejected his people, is “absolutely not.” He is still working among them today and we can see it in our world. And these verses tell us that some day, his people will experience fullness, the fullness of being in a living, dynamic relationship with God through the Messiah, Jesus. The majority of Jewish people will turn to faith in him and God will keep his covenant with them.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD MADE GOOD COME OUT OF BAD

The history of God’s chosen people was sadly one of repeated unfaithfulness to God. In the writings of the ancient Jewish prophets you hear a steady drumbeat of calling the people out for their rebellion against God, calling them back to him and warning them of coming judgment as a consequence for their rejection of him.

This culminated in the tragic rejection of God’s own Son, the long promised Messiah. For centuries the prophets foretold the coming of Messiah, the great hope of Israel. When he finally arrived, they rejected him. In Matthew 21:33-43 Jesus told the parable of the tenants. It was a story of a vineyard owner who leased his land to some farmers. But when he sent servants to collect the rent after the harvest, the tenants not only refused to pay the rent, they beat the servant up. Their rejection of the owner’s representatives escalated until finally the owner sent his own son, and they killed him. The story was a veiled description of how Israel had rejected God, rejected his prophets, and would soon kill his Son. The rejection of God was a terrible thing. It led to untold loss and misery for God’s people. But the cool thing is that God made something good come out of that grievously bad thing. Yes, it is awful that God’s own people rejected him. But the result according to Jesus in that parable and according to what Paul wrote in this passage, is that we who were not part of God’s chosen people, now have been grafted into his kingdom. We get this incredible blessing because God is able to make something wonderful come out of even a tragedy.

The old saying is if life hands you lemons, make lemonade. If what happens in this world hands God lemons, he doesn’t just make lemonade, he makes an entire delicious meal for us, with an incredible lemon sauce for some of the best fish you’ve ever eaten and lemon meringue pie for dessert, and then he gives you a spectacular mansion that is beyond your wildest dreams to live in and eat that meal in. And he plants some lemon trees in the backyard along with some orange trees, peach trees and cherry trees so you can eat fruit to your heart’s content.

In Ephesians 2:12 Paul wrote that we Gentiles “were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” That was our state. We were outsiders. We had no claim on God or his promises. We were without him, which meant we had no hope. But God used the rejection by his own people to bring us into his kingdom. We now have citizenship in his kingdom, we have his promises, we have him, and we have hope.

One reminder is important for those of us who are Gentiles. The roots of our tree of faith are totally Jewish. We owe much to them. We should never forget that they are God’s chosen people and he still has a plan for them. They will play a role in his future work at some point. That means we should always be thankful for the Jewish people and should always treat them with great respect, love and gratitude.

The lesson to be learned here is that God was able to somehow bring good out of the worst thing that has ever happened in history. Whatever difficult thing may happen in our lives, we need to remember what we saw back in Romans 8, that God is able to somehow bring good out of it. That means there is always hope.

Many years ago there was a follower of Jesus who played baseball for the Baltimore Orioles. He had considerable success with them for 5 years. Then came a shock, something he and his wife never expected. The Orioles traded him to the San Diego Padres. They had made their home in Baltimore. They thought he would play out his career there. They were very happy. He was doing really well, and then seemingly out of the blue, for no reason, he was traded. They were crushed. It felt like a rejection. Plus it meant moving all the way across the country. They had lived their whole lives on the East Coast. Their families were there. Now they had to leave all of that to live in a place far from home. It got worse. It will not surprise you to know that the Padres were terrible. The manager of the team was kind of a knucklehead. He didn’t like this new player, he didn’t like Christians and he made life miserable for him. The whole thing felt like he’d done something wrong and was being punished. It was a bad thing. But early in their stay here they came to our church. We became friends. That guy would be on the Padres for less than one season. Before that season was over they traded him away. He went on to have several great years after that, going with his new team to two World Series, winning one of them. But here’s the thing. Out of that seemingly terrible thing came a friendship that has now lasted more than 30 years. They have lived back on the East Coast for most of that time, but we still are in touch with them. Yes, a bad thing happened. But God brought much good out of it. That’s what he does.

Right now we have a good friend who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. This is a person who is one of the most positive, joyful, outgoing people we have ever known. But now she doesn’t even know who we are. This is a terrible, painful thing. When something like this happens, we have to remind ourselves of the truth that God makes good come out of bad. In some cases, we may not know what the good is. It may come many years or even centuries later. But we can know that the good will come. It’s what God does.

WITH GOD, THINGS ARE NEVER AS BAD AS THEY LOOK

This is related to what I just said. We need to remember what happened with Elijah. He became discouraged, defeated and depressed. He thought the situation was so bad there was no hope and he wanted to die. He felt all alone. He was trying to be faithful for God and had stood up for him, thought he’d won a great victory, and all it got him was a death threat from the most powerful woman in Israel.

But God told him he only thought he was alone. In fact, there were thousands of people still faithful to God. The situation was not as dire as it appeared to him to be. The message of the Bible is that God has always had his faithful people. For many years of my life I knew about the vigorous efforts of communist governments in the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe, in China and other places to eradicate any trace of Christianity. It seemed hopeless in those places. And yet the church of Jesus Christ survived. In fact, in several of the Eastern European countries it played a key role in overthrowing those oppressive regimes. Today we know that in many Islamic countries to follow Christ is incredibly perilous, even deadly. Yet I read just a couple of weeks ago about remarkable things happening in many of those countries as people are coming to Christ in large numbers, often by astounding means.

Again the message is that we can’t always know or see what God is doing. What we do know is that he is always at work. It may not be apparent to us, but he is there and he is working. There is never a time when we need despair. Craig Keener, professor at Asbury Seminary, tells the story of Therese, and what happened to her when she was 2, back around 1960. She lived in the Republic of the Congo and at that young age she was bitten by a snake. By the time her mother, Antoinette, found her she was unresponsive and not breathing. There was no medical help in their village, so Antoinette strapped her little daughter on her back and headed for the next village. But it took her 3 hours to get there. Brain cells begin dying after 5 minutes of being deprived of oxygen. After 6 minutes brain damage is inevitable. Of course after much more time death ensues. Yet Antoinette found a family friend in the next village, an evangelist named Coco Ngoma Moyise. Together they prayed over the lifeless girl, and incredibly, she began breathing again. The next day she was fine and showed no effects of her trauma whatsoever. Today Therese has a master’s degree and serves as a pastor in Congo. Keener says he is skeptical of stories like that. It feels like one of those urban legends that get told, but has no root in fact. But in this case he says the story is hard to deny. Therese is his sister-in-law and Antoinette is his mother-in-law. Things don’t get much worse than they looked that day for Therese and her mother. But God was there. That should serve as a reminder that with God, things are never quite as bad as they might look.

GOD IS ALWAYS FAITHFUL

God made promises to his people. Genesis 17:7 quotes God saying to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” In Jeremiah 32:40 God said, “I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them.”

These verses remind us that God will keep that promise. He has not cast his people aside forever. There will be a time when they will return to him in large numbers and find that his covenant with them is still valid. When God promises something is forever, then it is forever, because he is always faithful. This brings great encouragement to us. God has made promises to us also. This is a big reminder that he always keeps his promises, so we can be at peace. We need never doubt that God will keep his word to us.

Our son, Toby, has a lot of impressive qualities, but one in particular is an amazing amount of determination. When he sets his mind to do something he will move heaven and earth to accomplish it. We have seen that in a number of ways, but the most obvious has to do with his profession. He decided quite late that he would like to be a doctor. Because of his circumstances at the time it seemed a nearly impossible goal. We had a couple of friends, one of them in the medical field, that told him not to pursue that goal, saying it was going to not be possible for him. Despite the odds, he persevered and achieved his goal. I think of this trait as dogged determination because the first time I remember being very much aware of it had to do with a dog. It actually led to a test of character for me. Toby was about 10. He and Carissa had decided they wanted a dog. Laurie and I didn’t really want a dog. I absolutely didn’t want to spend any money to buy a dog I didn’t really want in the first place. The kids had decided they didn’t just want a dog, they wanted a particular kind of dog. They wanted an American Eskimo dog. The problem was, they were quite expensive. I explained this to the kids, but this is where Toby’s dogged determination showed up. For weeks he would go through the newspaper classified ads looking for American Eskimos for sale. There were always quite a few, and they were always expensive. They were usually around $350. In today’s dollars that would be probably around 700, We could not afford that and I was opposed to the idea even if we could afford it. I told Toby this, but he was not to be deterred. He negotiated with me. How much would I spend? He and Carissa could scrape together $50, couldn’t I chip in 100? I agreed to this, knowing that he would never find a dog he wanted for that price. He found one person’s ad that he thought was hopeful. She had a litter of Eskie pups that were a bit lower than most, but still way out of reach. He called this woman and explained that he really wanted one of the pups but all he had was 150, was there any way she would sell him one? She was very nice and told him she would think about it and he should call her back in a week. He was excited because he was sure this was going to work. He said if the woman agreed we would buy the dog, right Dad? Because you said for that price we’d buy the dog. I confidently said yes, because I was certain this woman was just being nice and just saying no by putting Toby off. But he was determined. A week later he called her back. She said, “I can see that you really want this dog. If you still want it for 150 I will sell it to you.” I was stunned. I was also stuck. I had promised Toby we would buy the dog at that price if she agreed. Would I keep my promise? I absolutely did not want to buy that dog, but the only way I could be faithful to my promise and show my son he could trust me was to buy the dog. We went that day and bought that dog. It went down easier when we saw him. He literally was the cutest dog I had ever seen.

God has made promises to us. He has promised us that if we simply believe in his Son, Jesus, and his work, that he will forgive all of our wrongs, flaws and failings. He will love us unconditionally and adopt us as his children. He will give us eternal life. He will give us a new life right now. He will be with us always. He will give us the strength to deal with life. He will supply all our needs. He will make good come out of everything that happens to us. Do you think I am more faithful to my promises than God is to his? The answer is no. Despite constant rebellion and rejection from his own people, through centuries God remains faithful to his promises to his people. And we can know that he will be faithful to keep the promises he has given to us.

We are all going to have confusing, difficult moments. But our Father is here. He is at work. He is ever faithful to us. He told us he would never abandon us, that he will always be with us, and will always keep his word to us. We may not understand what is going on. We may not even understand what he is saying, but we can be calm because he is here, and he is faithful. Today, this day, God is with us and will keep his promises to us.