

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 11,

Romans 9:7-11:32

6-min. Video Overview

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All right, today we're jumping into one of the most, let's say, dense parts of the Bible, Romans chapters 9 through 11. I mean, these chapters tackle a huge, really controversial question that was shaking the early church right to its core. So you've got to understand, for the Apostle Paul, this wasn't just some abstract idea.

This was personal. He's looking around and seeing his own people, Israel, the ones who'd been waiting for the Messiah for centuries, largely saying, no thanks. But at the same time, you have all these non-Jews, the Gentiles, flocking to this new faith.

It just didn't add up. It's like, wait a minute, what about all of God's promises to Israel? How could they still be true? Okay, so Paul kicks things off by basically laying out this massive puzzle. He has to explain what's going on.

How can God's promises to Israel, promises that have been around for generations, still be valid when what's happening in the real world seems to completely contradict them? It's a paradox, and he's about to dive in and solve it. And this is how he sets it up. It's a tale of two paths, and they couldn't be more different.

You've got Israel, who really tried, right? They pursued righteousness by following God's law, but they didn't get there. And then you have the Gentiles, who weren't even on this path, weren't even looking for righteousness, and boom, they find it just through faith. See the problem? This is the core contradiction he needs to unravel.

So how in the world does Paul start to unpack this thing? Well, he goes right to the foundation, to a principle that for him is completely non-negotiable, and that is the absolute, total sovereignty of God. This is the key, he thinks, to the whole puzzle. What Paul's saying is this.

God's plan was never, ever about who worked the hardest or what your background was. It wasn't about merit. From day one, it was always about His grace and His choice.

It's not about us trying to climb a ladder to God. It's about God reaching down to us. And to really drive this home, he pulls out this incredibly powerful analogy from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.

The idea is simple. We're the clay. God is the potter.

And the clay doesn't get to turn to the potter and say, hey, why'd you make me like this? It's a really bold, almost jarring statement, right? It's meant to stop any human complaint about fairness right in its tracks. Okay, but then he takes this potter and clay thing even further. He talks about these vessels of wrath.

Think of Pharaoh in the Exodus story. Paul's argument is that God allows figures like that to exist for a very specific reason, to show everyone His incredible power. And in that contrast, He also reveals the amazing depth of His glory to the vessels of mercy- that's everyone, Jew and Gentile, that He has chosen.

All right, now get ready for a major twist in the argument. Paul's about to claim that bringing the Gentiles into the family, well, that was never plan B. It wasn't something God came up with after Israel stumbled. Nope.

Paul says this was the plan all along. And the clues were hidden in plain sight, right there in Israel's own scriptures. So how does he prove it? He grabs this quote from the prophet Hosea.

Now, originally, that quote was all about God restoring a rebellious Israel. But Paul does something brilliant with it. He says, look, if God could take Israel when they were acting like they weren't His people and call them my people again, then, of course, He has the power to do the very same thing for the Gentiles, who, you know, were never His people to begin with.

It's a really clever bit of reasoning. And he's not just pulling this out of thin air. This wasn't some one-off idea.

You can find this theme all over the place in the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Zechariah. The idea that God's family would one day expand beyond just ethnic Israel was already there, woven right into the story. Okay, so that raises a pretty big question, right? If this inclusive plan was always in the works, why did so many from Israel not see it? What was the stumbling block? And maybe more importantly, what's the path forward now for everyone? Paul points to the core problem, and it's a subtle but crucial one.

The issue wasn't the law itself. The law was good. The issue was how they were using it.

They were trying to treat it like a checklist to earn their way into God's good graces, to prove their own righteousness. But Paul says that was never the point of the law. It was supposed to point to something or someone else.

And then he lays out the alternative path, and it's shockingly simple, totally accessible. He does this other really bold thing. He takes a famous passage from Deuteronomy that was originally about the law being easy to access, and he reapplies it to Jesus.

The message is that salvation isn't some impossible quest. The word you need is right here. It's as close as the words on your lips and the belief in your heart.

And this all builds to a really powerful idea: that Jesus himself is this stone from the prophecies. For the people trying to build their own righteousness on the foundation of the law, he ended up being a stumbling block. But for everyone else, Jew or Gentile, who simply puts their trust in him, he becomes the cornerstone of a brand new, totally inclusive community.

But hang on, Paul's not done yet. He knows that some of his Gentile readers might be getting a little puffed up about all this. So he ends with one final metaphor.

It's beautiful, it's powerful, and it's designed to show that God has not given up on his promises to Israel. Not by a long shot. He brings up this image of a cultivated olive tree.

Now, for his audience, this would have been an instant connection. It was a deeply resonant symbol for the people of Israel. And then he explains that this tree has been through some pretty radical gardening, you could say.

First off, he says some of the natural branches were broken off. These represent the people in Israel who didn't accept this new path of faith. Their unbelief led to them being, well, pruned from the tree.

And then, in their place, something totally unexpected happened. Wild olive branches- that's the Gentiles- were grafted in. Paul makes a point of saying this is contrary to nature, which is his way of highlighting just how miraculous and gracious this whole thing is.

The Gentiles are now getting their life from the very same roots, the heritage and promises given to Israel. But here, here is the absolute genius of the plan, according to Paul. Grafting in the Gentiles isn't the final move.

It's actually part of a bigger strategy. The goal is to make the original branches jealous, a kind of good jealousy. The hope is that when they see these outsiders passionately embracing their God, it will stir something in them, make them want to come back and be grafted into their own tree.

The ultimate goal is the salvation of all Israel. So when you step back, Paul has painted this just breathtaking picture of God's plan throughout history. It's a design where nothing is wasted, not even rejection or failure.

It's all woven together by a sovereign God into this incredible story of redemption that includes everyone. And it just leaves you with this question, doesn't it? A plan where failure actually leads to mercy and a stumbling block becomes the cornerstone. What does that really tell us about the nature of grace?