

MERCY FOR ALL

By SCOTT GRANT

I don't have nearly the time to read everything I'd like to read, so I'm a devoted consumer of book reviews. A good review informs me of the essential contents of a book. I want to know two things from a review: 1) What is the book about? 2) What point does the book make?

In Romans 9-11, Paul tells a story. What's the story about? The answer comes at the beginning: It's about Israel (Romans 9:1-5). What point does the story make? The answer, though it emerges in different parts of the story, comes at the end: God's mercy is for everyone (Romans 11:30-32). When Paul is finished telling the story, he praises God. The story of Israel connects us with God's mercy and leads us into worship.

In Romans 11, Paul writes the final chapter to the story of Israel. Romans 9:6-29 featured Israel's past. Romans 9:30-10:21 featured, from a first century perspective, Israel's present. Finally, Romans 11 features Israel's future. The future of the world, it turns out, is bound together with the future of Israel. In Romans 9-11, Paul tells the story of Israel from beginning to end, from Abraham to new creation, where the story begins anew. If we will let it, Romans 11 will lift us above our present concerns by connecting us to God's ancient story in a way that anticipates its glorious conclusion.

Paul poses two questions, first in verse 1 and then in verse 11. They can be rephrased this way: 1) Can any Jews be saved? 2) Can any more Jews be saved? The answer in each case, of course, is an emphatic yes.

Romans 11:

¹*I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.* ²*God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?* ³*“Lord, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE.”* ⁴*But what is the divine response to him? “I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL.”* ⁵*In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.* ⁶*But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.*

⁷*What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened;* ⁸*just as it is written,*

*“GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR,
EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT,
DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY.”*

⁹*And David says,*

*“LET THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP,
AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM.*

¹⁰*LET THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT,*

AND BEND THEIR BACKS FOREVER.”

¹¹I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹²Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! ¹³But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.

¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²²Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

²⁵For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written,

*“THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION,
HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.*

*²⁷“THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM,
WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”*

²⁸From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy.

³²For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

³³Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? ³⁵Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? ³⁶For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Some Jews believe the gospel

If Paul’s reading of history is accurate, then God has been faithful to his promises to Israel through Jesus Christ, even if most Jews have rejected the gospel. God never

promised an ever-expanding Jewish empire. He promised to defeat sin and death through his partnership with Israel and to open up membership in his people to the entire world. He has done so in the death and resurrection of the Messiah, the faithful Israelite. If this reading is correct, and most Jews find themselves outside the covenant because of their rejection of the gospel, can God be accused of rejecting his people, the Jews?

The presence of some Jews among God's people proves that he has not rejected those with whom he first partnered. Paul himself, a member of the new covenant people of God, is a no-doubt-about-it Jew. And just as 7,000 Israelites in Elijah's day remained faithful to the Lord, some Jews in Paul's day, "a remnant according to God's gracious choice," have embraced the gospel and are part of the new covenant people of God.

The presence of the Jewish remnant in Paul's day is attributable to God's grace: his merciful choice of some Jews, which was instrumental in their openness to the gospel. The same was true in Elijah's day, when the Lord "kept" for himself 7,000 Israelites. Thus it has always been: Membership in God's people has always been based on God's grace. When Paul says "it is no longer on the basis of works," he's not saying that works were at one time instrumental in covenant membership. He's simply correcting a Jewish misunderstanding that tended to confine membership to Jews on the basis of possession of, and adherence to, the Mosaic Law. If such a view could be argued for at one time, the advent of Christ, who emphatically opens up membership to all people, shoots it down.

Only those Israelites whom God chose obtained membership in his new covenant people. Israel as a whole was seeking membership, defined as "righteousness" in Romans 9:30-33, but did not obtain it, because it was seeking it in a national way on the basis of the law, which only it possessed. God hardened that part of Israel that rejected the gospel, just as he hardened Pharaoh after he refused to release the Israelites (Romans 9:17-18). When God hardens people, he postpones judgment for a purpose. In the meantime, he gives them what they want: hearts that are insensitive to him. God hardened Pharaoh in order to rescue the Israelites in such a way that the rest of the world would take notice.

The hardening of Israel is nothing new, as illustrations from all three categories of scripture indicate: the law (Deuteronomy), the prophets (Isaiah) and the writings (the Psalms). God responded to disobedience both in the days of Moses and Isaiah by hardening Israel (Deuteronomy 29:4, Isaiah 29:10). David prayed that God would thwart his enemies by, in effect, hardening them (Psalm 69:22-23). God is doing to Israel in Paul's day what he has done to it throughout its history. He's doing what he did to the idolaters of Romans 1: giving them over to their sin, to what they want (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

What Jewish unbelief accomplishes

If God hardens disobedient people for a purpose, what's his purpose in hardening that part of Israel that has rejected its Messiah? Paul begins his explanation in verse 11.

Israel as a whole "stumbled": It has rejected its Messiah. It has tripped, but has it fallen, so that no more Jews can be saved? Paul's answer, as expected, is an emphatic no. From Paul's perspective, Israel's rejection of the Messiah—its transgression—had a positive, two-fold effect.

First, salvation has come to the Gentiles. This can be seen in Paul's ministry. He preached Christ to the Jews. When the Jews rejected the gospel, he took it to the Gentiles, who were more responsive. Second, Gentile response to the gospel provokes Jewish

jealousy and openness to the gospel. This also can be seen even in Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. If Jews see one of their countrymen fulfilling the vocation of Israel to be a light to the world, and if they see Gentiles coming into possession of the promises that first belonged to them, then perhaps they will want to get in on the deal. In this way, Paul magnifies his ministry so that he might provoke to jealousy his countrymen and save some from unbelieving Israel. God may have hardened unbelieving Israel, but that doesn't mean that those who are part of it can't come to believe in their Messiah.

But what does the "fulfillment" of the Jews mean? It's related to the salvation of "some of them." If something bad for Israel resulted in something good for the world, then something good for Israel will result in something better for the world. If the Jews' rejection of the gospel resulted in riches and reconciliation for the Gentiles, then the acceptance of some Jews—their "fulfillment"—will result in "life from the dead." This is a reference to final salvation, which will feature the resurrection of God's people, both Jewish and Gentile believers in the gospel, and the renewal of creation (Romans 8:19-25). Paul does not specify the number of conversions that amounts to the "fulfillment" of the Jews. His purpose, at any rate, is to cause his Gentile readers to value the Jews in general and their conversion in particular. If the conversion of Jews is related to the final resurrection from the dead and the renewal of creation, then it's something Gentiles should appreciate. Paul wants his Gentile readers to know that the family of God is not complete without the Jews.¹

The illustrations in verse 16 indicate that the first part of something guarantees the whole.² The point of the illustrations is that Israel, including the part that has rejected the gospel, remains "holy." Paul doesn't mean that all Jews will be saved; he means that they can still be saved.³

Warning against Gentile arrogance

In verses 17-24, the tree represents the people of God. When it was first planted, so to speak, the branches consisted entirely of ethnic Jews. As it grew, it was mostly a Jewish tree. But after the Messiah came, it became a mostly Gentile tree.

Because of these developments, Gentiles in Paul's day may want to feel superior to Jews. Just as Paul warned against Jewish arrogance in Romans 2:17-24 and 3:27-30, he warns against Gentile arrogance in Romans 11:17-24. Such arrogance is inappropriate, because Gentiles too are dependent on the root.⁴ True, Jewish unbelief was instrumental in the gospel's movement to the Gentiles, as Paul himself notes in verse 11 and reiterates in verse 20. But membership in the people of God is based solely on faith. Many Jews thought they were members of God's people based on ethnicity. Paul doesn't want the Gentiles to make the same mistake. If they're inclined toward arrogance, they should "fear." For if they think of themselves as belonging to God's people based on anything other than faith, then they, too, will find themselves on the outside.

Paul's horticultural illustration displays both the kindness and the severity of God: his kindness, in making faith in the gospel the only requirement, and his severity, in disqualifying anyone who refuses faith. He is kind toward those who cast themselves on his mercy, and severe toward those who don't want it. Anyone will be excluded from the people of God for unbelief. Anyone can join on the basis of faith.

Paul is speaking in broad categories. Jews, as a general category, were part of the people of God before the advent of Christ. Gentiles, as a general category, were excluded.

Some years after the advent of Christ, generally speaking, Gentiles were part of the people of God and Jews were excluded.

If an individual Jew came to believe the gospel in Paul's day, we're not left to assume that he was being included for the second time, as if he belonged prior to the advent of Christ, didn't belong after the advent of Christ and then belonged again. On the contrary, if such an individual were to be included, he would have emerged from a category that had been included and then excluded. He, as an individual, would be joining for the first time.

Likewise, if an individual Gentile were to be excluded in Paul's day, we're not left to assume that she was being excluded after first being included. No, such an individual would have been excluded even though she was from a category that was at that time being included. She, as an individual, would not be leaving anything she was once part of.

Therefore, Paul is not saying that an individual who is a bonafide member of the people of God, based on faith, can then lose or forfeit his or her membership.⁵ Nevertheless, his warning should not be taken lightly. There are those who think they are part of God's family but, in fact, are not (Matthew 21:41-46). Paul's point, even if the particulars of his argument may be difficult for us to follow, is clear enough: Jews can join the people of God. They can join the "tree" that their people once dominated. For if God brought about the unexpected and unusual, in grafting Gentiles into a mostly Jewish tree, he can certainly graft Jews into that tree, which started out as "their own."⁶ Are any Jews saved? Yes, Paul says in verses 1-11. Can any more Jews be saved? Yes, Paul says in verses 12-24.

The future of Israel

Some Jews were arrogant; now Paul addresses Gentile arrogance. Some Jews were ignorant of God's plan, which included the Gentiles on an equal basis (Romans 10:1-4). Now, in verse 25, Paul doesn't want the Gentiles to be uninformed—literally, "ignorant"—about the mystery that he's been revealing in Romans 11. When Paul uses the word "mystery" in similar contexts elsewhere, he's talking about the inclusion of Gentiles among the Jews in the people of God (Ephesians 3:1-10, Colossians 1:25-27). He uses it in a similar manner here, while emphasizing the openness of God's people to more Jews.

As Paul said in verse 7, part of Israel has been hardened: God has responded to the disobedient part of Israel by rendering it insensitive to him. In so doing, he postponed final judgment against its members and sent Jewish believers such as Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. The hardening of Israel has thereby allowed for the "fullness" of the Gentiles to join God's people. At the same time, Gentile conversions allows for the "fullness" of the Jews to join God's people (verse 12). (The word in verse 12 translated "fulfillment," in connection with the Jews, is the same word in verse 25 that is translated "fullness," in connection with the Gentiles.)

In this manner, "all Israel will be saved."⁷ Paul is not predicting the salvation of all Jews or the salvation of Israel as a nation. He has described an "Israel" within Israel: an Israel that believes in its Messiah. In Romans 9:6, he said, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel"; not "all" those who are part of Israel as a whole are part of this Israel. More Jews can and will be added to believing Israel. This Israel, of course,

will be saved. Paul has already described the manner in which it will be saved: The conversion of the Gentiles is provoking the conversion of the Jews, even now, as he says in verse 31. Final salvation, featuring the resurrection from the dead, is in the future for this Israel (as it is for believing Gentiles, of course). Paul has nothing to say regarding the number of Jews who will make up this Israel on the day of final salvation.⁸

Paul invokes Isaiah 59:20-21, which predicted the coming of a deliverer and the enacting of a new covenant to deal with sin in Israel. The deliverer, the Messiah, has come, and a new covenant has been enacted. In Paul's use of the Isaiah text, the references to "Zion" and "Jacob" make the point that the new covenant was for Jews first and remains open to them. The gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).⁹

Showcasing God's mercy

In verses 28-32, Paul again lays out the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to salvation in order to showcase God's mercy. Most Jews in Paul's day are enemies of the gospel, and even enemies of God, but his mercy remains open to them, particularly in light of his partnership with the "fathers" of Israel—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose stories introduced Romans 9-11. God's love can turn enemies of God into sons of God (Romans 5:8-10). God's mercy prevailed in the face of Gentile disobedience: Many Gentiles who wanted nothing to do with the God of Israel came to believe his gospel. God's mercy will likewise prevail in the face of Jewish disobedience: More Jews will come to believe the gospel.

Jewish disobedience in some way was responsible for the inclusion of the Gentiles, which demonstrated God's mercy. If Jewish disobedience provoked Gentile inclusion, how much more should God's mercy, showcased by the inclusion of the Gentiles, provoke Jewish inclusion? God's mercy has more potential to effect change than human disobedience. God's mercy is being showcased "now" so that Jews may be included now. Paul envisions the ongoing conversion of both Jews and Gentiles and their side-by-side entry into the people of God.¹⁰

Both Gentiles and Jews have been disobedient to God. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:20). Neither Gentiles nor Jews are included on the basis of their worthiness; they're included on the basis of God's mercy. If history demonstrates universal human disobedience and universal divine mercy, then neither Jews nor Gentiles have an exclusive claim on God. On the contrary, God's mercy is open to all. Jewish believers should therefore welcome Gentile believers into their midst. More particularly, from the perspective of Romans 11, Gentile believers should welcome Jewish believers into their midst.

The wisdom and knowledge of God

Verse 32 emphasizes the mercy of God and sums up, in a shorthand way, not only Romans 11, but also Romans 9-11 and the entire letter up to this point. So when Paul breaks into praise in verses 33-36, he's reflecting on all of Romans 1-11.

Paul has told the breathtaking story of the righteousness of God: his faithfulness to rescue the world, both Jews and Gentiles, from sin and death. After humanity rejected God, he partnered with Israel to rescue the world. Israel was unfaithful, but God was not

deterred. His plan devolved onto one faithful Israelite, the Messiah, who defeated sin and death in his crucifixion and resurrection. God then sent his Holy Spirit to implement Christ's victory and renew humanity. For the most part, Israel rejected the good news of Christ's victory over sin and death. Nevertheless, the gospel went out to the rest of the world, where it was better received. Moreover, the responsiveness of the world is serving to draw Israel back to God. The renewal of humanity will culminate in the resurrection of the people of God, who will dwell with him and serve him in his creation, which will also be renewed.

None of us, in our best dreams or worst nightmares, could make up a story like that. We never would have thought to address the problems of the world in this way. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" Paul has demonstrated the flaws in human wisdom and knowledge (Romans 1:22, 2:20, 10:2, 11:25). We couldn't have dreamed up the story, but we needed the story. Praise God: He mined the depth of his riches, wisdom and knowledge and gave it to us. He gave us Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

God's judgments, which implement his saving justice, are unsearchable. They are so just that they seem unjust. His ways, in faithfulness to his promise to rescue the world, are unfathomable. They are beyond human understanding. One sinless man dies for the sins of the world. Where's the justice in that? The tribe he comes from rejects him. Those from other tribes embrace him so that he might be embraced by his own tribe in the end. Who can understand it?

In verses 34-35, Paul invokes Isaiah and Job, both of whom faced questions concerning divine justice (Isaiah 40:13, Job 41:11). The answers—for Isaiah, Job and Paul—feature the wisdom and knowledge of God. As God spoke through the prophet and the sage, he speaks again through the apostle. God is the creator and redeemer. We might think we know how to do things. We might think God owes us something. Paul thinks the gospel story devours such pretentiousness.

All things are "from" him, "through" him and "to" him. God created everything and everyone. Everything and everyone is dependent on him. Everything and everyone is subservient to him. So too the gospel: It comes from his mind and heart, it's implemented through his Son and his Spirit, and it serves to honor him.

So we agree with Paul: "To him be the glory forever. Amen."

Paul's spirited defense of the gospel leads us to the conclusion that God's way of rescuing the world is ultimately unfathomable. Questions about divine justice are finally answered by the awesome wisdom and knowledge of God, which we can only partially penetrate now. Even our limited understanding of his wisdom and knowledge takes our breath away. Perhaps if we spent more time worshiping God for his wisdom and knowledge, we'd have a better sense that we can trust him for the answers to all our questions.

Appreciating the older brother

God is doing currently with Israel what he has done historically with it. Even before Christ, there was an Israel within Israel that remained faithful to God. If most Jews today reject what the New Testament says about God, Paul would say that most of his countrymen, historically, have also rejected what the Hebrew Scriptures said about God.

God is doing with most Jews what he's doing with most humans: He is giving them over to their sin, to what they want, in hopes that they'll turn to Christ. As the gospel continues to make unprecedented inroads in the world, particularly Latin America, Africa and Asia, we can hope and pray that more Jews, who represent the original people of God, will recognize the presence of their God in Jesus the Messiah. For we must not think that it's an abnormal thing when a Jew comes to Christ. They are the people of the Messiah. The abnormal thing, if it can be spoken of in such terms, is not that there are Jews for Jesus but that there are Gentiles for Jesus.

One of the things Paul is doing in Romans 9-11 is defending the gospel against Jewish unbelief. In Romans 11, he adds one more piece of evidence to his case. If someone were to question the credibility of the gospel because most Jews, historically and presently, have rejected it, Romans 11 tells us that the story of Israel isn't finished yet. God isn't through with that part of Israel that doesn't believe the gospel. Some Jews believe. For Paul, the presence of only 7,000 faithful Jews was enough to demonstrate that God was not finished with Israel. There are many more than 7,000 Messianic Jews today. We can certainly be thankful, therefore, for ministries such as Jews for Jesus. God's mercy is open to all Jews. More Jews will believe. When the story is finished, Israel will be complete.

Furthermore, the story of the world will be complete, at which point it will begin anew in the new creation. The conversion of another Jew to Christ tells us that a new world is coming. The "fulfillment" of Israel through the conversion of a certain number of Jews known only to God will signal final salvation: the resurrection of God's people and the renewal of creation. In God's plan, the story of Israel's Messiah is being acted out in its own story. Israel has experienced a death (it has been cast away by its God), but it will experience a resurrection (it will be accepted by its God again). We have every reason to value the Jews and repudiate whatever shred of anti-Semitism remains in the church of Jesus Christ. Our family is not complete without the Jews.

Paul's story of the Jews and the Gentiles in Romans 11 parallels Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The Gentiles are like the younger brother, and the Jews are like the older brother. While the Gentile world was worshiping other gods, the Lord called Israel his son (Exodus 4:22). The Gentiles, like the younger son, were openly rebellious. The Jews, like the older son, were silently rebellious. The Gentiles were lawless outside the law; the Jews were lawless inside the law. God, like the father in the parable, goes out to bring each of his children home. When the father leaves his house, it's a picture of the incarnation and crucifixion. God, in the person of Jesus, left his heavenly home to seek and save his lost sons. In the parable, the younger son comes home. Does the older come home as well? Jesus doesn't say. It's a story without an ending. The human story isn't complete until the older brother, the Jews, join the party.

What should we, as the younger brother, do? Scholar N.T. Wright suggests that we "try to live here in such a way that he'll want to come back. We can hold the sort of party he would enjoy. We can let him know how sorry we are, and make it clear he's really welcome, that we really do want him back. ... Perhaps we should ask the Father to have another go at persuading him. That's probably the best way of all."¹¹

Our support for the Jews, however, need not necessarily extend to political support for the modern state of Israel. Some get carried away by biblical prophecy and urge the church to support modern Israel in order to hasten the end times. The church does not have a moral obligation to support modern Israel; it has a moral obligation to

show no favoritism where moral issues are concerned. Blind support for modern Israel injures our brothers and sisters in Christ in that part of the world who are not Jewish. And most of them are not Jewish.

Overcoming arrogance

We must not only repudiate anti-Semitism, we must overcome any sense of national, ethnic, generational or ecclesiastical arrogance. If Paul were writing his letter to Peninsula Bible Church in 2007 instead of to the Roman church in AD 57, he would challenge any sense of ethnic superiority. He would challenge any among the elderly who patronize our younger members, and he would challenge any among the young who dismiss our elderly members. He would challenge any of us who advance our ideas about church as the best and universal way to know God. Membership in the people of God is based solely on faith that Jesus is Lord, which means we're entirely dependent on God's mercy. We are, in essence, dependent people.

If we want favor with God to be based in any part on something other than God's mercy, it's because we're prideful, insecure people who want to exclude others, at least to some degree, so that we can feel better about ourselves. History demonstrates universal human disobedience and universal divine mercy. No one group has an exclusive claim on God or an exclusive knowledge of his ways. On the contrary, God's mercy is open to all. If it's open to all, it's incumbent on us to value every person who enters into our midst.

After all, the story of Israel, as Paul tells it in Romans 9-11, is about mercy—God's mercy for all. Paul has shown that both Jews and Gentiles have been disobedient to God. God's mercy is a gift, not a right or privilege. Romans 11, together with Romans 9-10 and all of Romans 1-10, showcases God's mercy. God's mercy is on display even now, not only in the story of Israel but also in the story of the church—and in the story of this church. It's on display in your stories, for Jesus Christ has turned you from enemies of God into sons of God. It would behoove us, then, at the behest of Romans 11, to dwell on how we have seen God's mercy, particularly in our own lives, that we might worship God and extend his mercy to all.

One of the reasons I appreciate R&R, our recovery ministry, is that it connects me with God's mercy. Folks involved in the ministry are open about their lives, particularly their failures. They freely tell their stories. Many of them have hit bottom, where they have seen God's mercy. They are living, breathing examples of God's mercy.

A drunkard's story

Marmeladov, a character in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, is a drunkard, but he knows of God's mercy. When ridiculed by patrons at a tavern, he responds by telling them what he expects God to say in the final judgment:

“You too come forth,” He will say, “Come forth, ye drunkards, come forth, ye weak ones, come forth, ye children of shame!” And we shall all come forth without shame and shall stand before Him. . . . And the wise ones and those of understanding will say, “O Lord, why doest Thou receive these men?” And He will say, “This is why I receive them, O ye wise, this is why I receive them, O ye of understanding, that not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this.” And

He will hold out His hands to us and we shall fall down before Him ... and we shall weep ... and we shall understand all things! Then we shall understand all!¹²
[*The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, © 1988 by Plough Publishing House, Farmington, PA. Pp 163-64.]

Mercy and worship: One leads to the other.

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¹ Verse 15 echoes verse 12, both structurally and thematically. The “transgression” and “failure” of the Jews (verse 12) equates to their “rejection” (verse 15). The “riches” for the world and for the Gentiles (verse 12) equate to the “reconciliation” of the world to God (verse 15). The “fulfillment” of the Jews equates to their “acceptance.” If the transgression and failure of the Jews blessed the world with riches and reconciliation, then their fulfillment and acceptance will bless the world in an even greater way: with “life from the dead” (verse 15).

² The law called for the Israelites to offer of the first part, or first fruits, of their harvest to the Lord (Number 15:17-21). The first piece (literally, the “first fruits”) of dough probably illustrates the first converts to the gospel among the Jews, the remnant Paul spoke of in verses 1-10. In Romans 16:5, Paul calls the first convert in Asia literally “the first fruit.” He calls other converts “the first fruits of Achaia” in 1 Corinthians 16:15. Less certain is the identity of the “root.” Some indications point in the direction of Christ (Romans 15:12). It could also represent the first converts, Abraham and the patriarchal family (Romans 9:6-13) or Israel (Psalm 92:13, Jeremiah 11:17). The lump and the branches each represent Israel. Paul has already used the word “lump” in connection to Israel in Romans 9:21. A tree, particularly an olive tree, was a metaphor for Israel specifically and the people of God generally (Jeremiah 11:16, Hosea 14:6).

³ In 1 Corinthians 7:14. Paul says that an unbelieving husband or wife is “sanctified” by his or her believing spouse and that the children in the family are “holy.” The word translated “sanctified” (*hagiazō*) is related to the adjective translated “holy” (*hagios*). In this case, and in the case of Romans 11:16, to be holy is not to be saved, for Paul distinguishes between holiness and salvation in 1 Corinthians 7:16).

⁴ See footnote No. 2 for interpretation of “the root.”

⁵ Paul in Romans 5-8 emphasized the security of God’s family, the members of which may confidently hope for a future with God. The section opened and closed with the assurance of this hope. Nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38). It would seem odd for Paul to now say that those who are legitimately part of the people of God may in the future be excluded.

⁶ Paul says in verse 11 that “they did not stumble so as to fall.” In verse 22, he says God’s severity is for “those who fell.” In verse 11 Paul disavows the permanent exclusion of all Jews. In verse 22, he allows that unbelieving Jews will be excluded unless they embrace the gospel.

⁷ Paul uses the word translated “so” in verse 26 elsewhere in Romans to convey the manner in which something takes place irrespective of timing (Romans 1:15; 4:18; 5:12, 15, 18-19, 21; 6:4, 11, 19; 9:20; 10:6; 11:5, 31; 12:5; 15:20). He’s not describing anything new in verse 26. He’s summarizing what he’s already said.

⁸ Romans 11:26 echoes Romans 9:27: Although the number of the sons of Israel is like the sand of the sea, “it is the remnant that will be saved.” The remnant constitutes Jews who believe the gospel. It will be enlarged through Jewish conversions. The remnant is equivalent to “all Israel.”

⁹ The original Isaiah text has the deliverer coming “to” Zion, or Israel. In Paul’s use, the deliverer comes “from” Zion, as an Israelite to bless not only the Jews but the Gentiles as well. At the outset of Romans 9-11, Paul said that Christ came “from” Israel (Romans 9:5).

¹⁰ Once again, in verses 30-31, it’s clear that Paul is not anticipating the salvation of every Jew. He compares Jews and Gentiles in these verses, referring to believing Gentiles as “you” (plural) and

unbelieving Jews as “these.” Gentiles (you) have been shown mercy that Jews (these) might be shown mercy. Just as “you” does not include every Gentile, neither do “these” include every Jew.

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth*, © 1997 by N.T. Wright, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. P. 123.

¹² *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, © 1988 by Plough Publishing House, Farmington, PA. Pp 163-64.