

MERCY

The gospel continues to be offered to all people, Jews and Gentiles.

ROMANS 11:17-32

MEMORY VERSE: ROMANS 11:36

- **READ** Romans 11:1-36, First Thoughts (p. 102), and Understand the Context (pp. 102–103). As you read Romans 11:17-32, note the ways Gentiles are in the same position as Jews when it comes to salvation.
- **STUDY** Romans 11:17-32, using Explore the Text (pp. 103–107). Gain a deeper understanding of mercy using the *Holman Bible Dictionary*. Use *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary*, found in print or digital format at LifeWay.com, to aid your understanding of the passage.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 108–109) and More Ideas (p. 110). Look for ways of incorporating one of the More Ideas. Consult *QuickSource* for additional questions you can use in leading the discussion and an Object Lesson idea for the study.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A small branch from a tree or shrub; A board and marker; and Equipment to share the YouTube® video in the Suggested Music Idea (p. 110). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Romans*). Make copies of: **PACK ITEM 7** (*Handout: Romans Time Line*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God's Purpose of Grace

Election is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility (Phil. 2:5-7).

FIRST THOUGHTS

Think back to when you were a kid. When the time came to choose players for kickball, how quickly were you picked? Were you one of the first or were you one of the last to be picked? All of us want to be included. The good news is God includes all who come to Him in faith. Paul reminded his readers that salvation through faith in Jesus is available to everyone.

(In PSG, p. 86) **When was the last time you felt like you were on the outside looking in? What emotions does that stir up in your heart and mind?**

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about a practice.

Look up "graft" in a Bible dictionary. In what ways does Paul's use of the illustration of grafting differ from the ancient practice of grafting? In what ways is Paul's description similar? What points do you think Paul was making with this illustration?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ROMANS 11:1-36

This chapter can be divided into two sections following the two rhetorical questions Paul asked. The first question was, "Has God rejected his people?" (Rom. 11:1). Paul's answer was "Absolutely not! ... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (vv. 1-2). Paul was a perfect example of a Jew whom God had not rejected. Paul next traced the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Elijah was convinced that he alone was left among God's prophets; God informed Elijah that He had seven thousand prophets who had not bowed a knee to Baal. Elijah was far from alone (vv. 2-4). Paul concluded that, in the same way, God had preserved "a remnant chosen by grace" not by works (vv. 5-6).

The second section of this chapter answers the question, "Have they stumbled so as to fall?" Again, Paul's short answer was "Absolutely not!" (11:11). God intended that the salvation offered to Gentiles by means of Israel's transgression would make Israel jealous. Israel's transgression had brought spiritual riches to the world and to the Gentiles, specifically reconciliation for the world. Their acceptance would result in life from death (v. 15).

The last half of the chapter was addressed specifically to the Gentiles: "Now I am speaking to you Gentiles" (v. 13). Paul desired that his own ministry to the Gentiles would be used by God as part of His purpose in making Israel jealous, resulting in the salvation of some of them. Paul's purpose in explaining this mystery was to demonstrate to the Gentiles the utter futility of pride. The illustration of the cultivated olive tree and the wild olive tree was designed to explain God's plan to include both believing Jews and believing Gentiles into the same root where both would grow together. The fact that many of the Jews had not accepted the gospel message of salvation through faith did not mean that God's severity was His final answer. Through disobedience, God brought obedience; where there was no mercy, God brought mercy.

Paul ended this section of his letter with a doxology praising God's wisdom: "How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways!" (v. 33). Paul included three questions, the first two from Isaiah 40:13, the third probably from Job 41:3. No human being could stand before God as His advisor. God's sovereign plan of salvation could be trusted to accomplish His sovereign will. Paul ended his discussion of the role of Israel in God's plan with an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty over all: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (v. 36).

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Elijah, A Man of God," available digitally in the Spring 2020 issue of *Biblical Illustrator* for Explore the Bible at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BE HUMBLE (ROM. 11:17-21)

VERSES 17-18

Paul ended the preceding section with two analogies related to holiness. If the firstfruits and the root are holy, then the rest of the batch and the branches will be holy as well (Rom. 11:16). The image of the tree, specifically the process of grafting branches, provided Paul with the vehicle to demonstrate to the Gentiles the role of Israel in God's plan and to warn the Gentiles against arrogance with respect to the Jews.

Paul's two points of comparison were a **cultivated olive tree** and one that grew **wild**. The olive tree was occasionally used as a symbol for Israel and the image appeared on many of Israel's coins. The branches that have been **broken off** were those unbelieving Jews who had rejected the gospel of faith. The phrase **some of the branches** was a reminder that not all of the branches had been removed. In place of the branches that had been removed, the branches of a wild olive tree had been grafted in among the original branches.

At this point, Paul's example departs from common grafting practice. Generally, a shoot from the cultivated olive tree was grafted into the root of a wild olive tree. Wild olive trees did not produce quality fruit, but the stalk of the wild olive tree usually was hardier and could better support the cultivated olive branch, which grew better fruit. Bible teachers have attempted to find theological reasons for Paul departing from the standard method of grafting. Paul likely changed the agricultural process to fit the chronology of the truth he was illustrating. The wild olive branches (the Gentiles) had been grafted into the cultivated olive tree (Israel), thus joining believing Israel as the people of God. As such, the Gentiles **have come to share in the rich root of the cultivated olive tree**. They have become participants in all of God's blessings given to Israel (9:1-5).

Paul's primary point here was to discourage the Gentiles from boasting that they were superior to the Jews. Having experienced first hand God's opening the door of salvation to the Gentiles, the danger existed that the Gentiles would begin to think God's action somehow grew out of their own worth. God's grafting in of the Gentiles was an act of pure grace, unmerited on the part of the Gentiles.

VERSES 17-18

¹⁷ Now if some of the branches were broken off, and you, though a wild olive branch, were grafted in among them and have come to share in the rich root of the cultivated olive tree,
¹⁸ do not boast that you are better than those branches. But if you do boast—you do not sustain the root, but the root sustains you.

VERSES 19-21

¹⁹ Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ True enough; they were broken off because of unbelief, but you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but beware, ²¹ because if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

VERSE 22

²² Therefore, consider God’s kindness and severity: severity toward those who have fallen but God’s kindness toward you—if you remain in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

If the Gentiles were predisposed to boast, Paul had a reminder for them: ***you do not sustain the root, but the root sustains you.*** The root was not the Jewish people themselves, since both Jews and Gentiles were branches on the tree. Rather, the root referred to the patriarchs, particularly Abraham, who were the ones who received and passed on the promises of God given to Israel. Both believing Jews and believing Gentiles shared in the rich, spiritual nourishment of the root. This nourishment sustained the Gentiles, not the other way around.

VERSES 19-21

The Gentiles might have been tempted to say, ***“Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”*** Paul granted the truth of that statement but challenged the inference that the Gentiles might be tempted to draw from it. The removal of some branches and the grafting in of others had only to do with faith. The unbelieving Jews were removed because of their unbelief, just as the believing Gentiles stood because of their faith. Rather than a point of pride that could lead to arrogance, Paul insisted that Gentiles should ***beware.***

Paul exhorted the Gentiles to think about the situation in which the Jews found themselves. They had trusted the righteousness based on the law rather than the righteousness based on faith. Their lack of faith in the completed work of Christ on the cross led to their being broken off from the tree. Paul warned that if God did not spare these natural branches, the Gentiles could expect nothing less if they boasted in their own accomplishments rather than having faith in the gracious gift of Christ. Because salvation comes through faith alone, any arrogance or false pride toward those who have not believed is unwarranted.

Paul warned the believing Gentiles against the danger of arrogance in assuming they were better than the unbelieving Jews. How does Jesus’ story of the prayers of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:10-14) relate to Paul’s point in these verses?

BE THANKFUL (ROM. 11:22-24)

VERSE 22

Paul challenged his audience to reflect on the result of God’s sparing some but not others: ***Therefore, consider God’s kindness and severity.*** Both kindness and severity must be kept in balance because both are part of God’s character. God’s kindness was evident in the inclusion of the Gentiles. His severity was seen in His judgment on those Jews who refused to believe.

Those who refused to believe were said to be ***those who have fallen.*** Paul probably chose the word *fallen* here to contrast his earlier assertion that the believing Gentiles were those who “stand by faith” (11:20). Earlier Paul had

answered his rhetorical question about the Jews (“Have they stumbled so as to fall?”) with a resounding “Absolutely not!” (11:11). God’s purpose was to use the inclusion of the Gentiles to make Israel jealous.

God’s kindness was directed toward believing Gentiles (**toward you**). Paul’s point in this comparison becomes obvious at the end of the verse: believing Gentiles must **remain in his kindness**. Earlier in the letter, Paul had reminded the Jews that God’s kindness was meant to lead them to repentance (2:4). A hardened and unrepentant heart would inevitably lead them to God’s righteous judgment (2:5). As Paul had warned in the previous verse (11:21), an arrogant, unrepentant attitude would lead to the Gentiles being **cut off**.

VERSES 23-24

Paul emphasized the equal treatment of both Jew and Gentile. Just as the believing Gentiles were grafted into the olive tree, so Jews who **do not remain in unbelief** can be grafted back into the tree. Obviously, branches removed from a tree die and physically are not able to be grafted again. However, what is impossible for people is possible for God: **God has the power to graft them in again**.

Paul used a “how much more” argument to solidify his point. God had no trouble grafting the believing Gentiles, who were branches from a wild olive tree, into the cultivated olive tree. **How much more will these—the natural branches—be grafted into their own olive tree?** Underlying Paul’s argument was the assertion that there is only one tree, deeply rooted in God’s salvific action from Abraham to Jesus, into which both believing Jews and believing Gentiles are grafted.

God’s kindness and severity are seen in His activity both in salvation and in judgment. In what ways do we show our gratitude for God’s kindness that comes through faith?

BE AWARE (ROM. 11:25-32)

VERSE 25

Several issues in this section are difficult to understand, and various Bible teachers have interpreted them differently. However, Paul’s purpose in this section is clear; it is one he had stated earlier (11:20). He didn’t want the Gentile believers to be conceited. Having a proper perspective of the **mystery** God had revealed to Paul in Christ would rid these believers of the conceit they may have been tempted to feel toward unbelieving Jews.

Paul used the word *mystery* to refer to God’s plan of salvation that could only be understood by God’s revelation (16:25-26). When writing to the Ephesian believers, he explained the mystery as the inclusion of Gentiles into the body as coheirs (Eph. 3:3-7).

VERSES 23-24

²³ And even they, if they do not remain in unbelief, will be grafted in, because God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut off from your native wild olive tree and against nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these—the natural branches—be grafted into their own olive tree?

VERSE 25

²⁵ I don’t want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you will not be conceited: A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

In Romans, the mystery relates directly to the salvation of Israel, specifically the **partial hardening** that has **come upon Israel**. This hardening was limited in scope; not every single member of Israel was hardened, as evidenced by the fact that not every branch was broken out of the cultivated olive tree (Rom. 11:17). The hardening was also limited in time. It will last **until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in**. Paul had earlier pointed out that one reason for the inclusion of the Gentiles was to make Israel jealous (11:11-15). Paul was convinced that God had not rejected His people Israel (11:1-2) and would continue to work with them.

VERSES 26-27

²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, The Deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. ²⁷ And this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.

VERSES 26-27

For Paul, the outcome of this hardening will be that **in this way all Israel will be saved**. This passage has been interpreted in various ways. Some have read the text to mean that every individual ethnic Jew will be saved. This conclusion is difficult to maintain, given Paul's earlier statement that physical descent and outward circumcision did not make a person a Jew (2:28-29), and his quotation from Isaiah that a remnant of Israel would be saved (9:27; see also 11:5).

Some Bible students have interpreted *all Israel* as a reference to the church, relying in part on Paul's use of the phrase "the Israel of God" in Galatians (Gal. 6:16). However, this interpretation has difficulty reconciling Paul's insistence that God has not rejected His people Israel (Rom. 11:1-2). In addition, the use of the illustration of the cultivated olive tree seems to be best understood as a reference to ethnic Israel.

Salvation will always be through faith in Christ's completed work on the cross.

However we interpret this verse, at least two things seem clear. First, the reference to Israel as a whole (*all Israel*) does not necessarily refer to every individual Jew. Second, however God works out the inclusion of Israel, salvation will always be through faith in Christ's completed work on the cross. In chapter 3, Paul made abundantly clear that faith in Christ was the way for salvation for both Jew and Gentile.

Paul used a quotation from Isaiah to reinforce his point. In the context of Isaiah, God was **the Deliverer** who **will come from Zion** (Isa. 59:20). Paul applied this verse to Jesus, indicating his understanding of the unique relationship between the Father and the Son. Paul trusted God's promise to remove ungodliness from Jacob through the Deliverer.

The promise of God's covenant in Isaiah 59:21 brought to mind the forgiveness of sins, also promised by God. The last phrase of this quotation (**when I take away their sins**) probably echoes God's promise of a covenant written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). Some Bible teachers have suggested that Paul was echoing the promise of forgiveness recorded in Isaiah 27:9. In either case, the Deliverer of Jacob would provide forgiveness of sins through His death on the cross.

VERSES 28-29

Israel is both an enemy and a friend of God. **Regarding the gospel**, Israel had demonstrated itself to be God's enemy because by and large it had rejected that gospel, opening the door for the Gentiles. Paul dealt with this aspect of Israel's relationship in Romans 9:30–10:21.

On the other hand, with respect to the election of Israel as God's chosen people, it is **loved because of the patriarchs**. Paul dealt with this in chapter 11. It is to the nourishing root of these patriarchs that the believing Gentiles have been grafted (11:17).

Paul grounded God's love for Israel because of the patriarchs in the fact that **God's gracious gifts and calling are irrevocable**. The Greek word translated *irrevocable* means to be without regret. The word is used only one other time in the New Testament, where it carries this meaning (2 Cor. 7:10). The *calling* probably refers to Israel's status as the chosen people of God. The *gifts* may be a reference to the benefits associated with God's calling, benefits that were summarized in Romans 9:4-5. God's calling and gifts demonstrate clearly that God has not rejected His people (11:1).

VERSES 30-32

God's calling and gifts for Israel are related to the disobedience and subsequent mercy received by the believing Gentiles. Formerly, the Gentiles had been disobedient to God and were separated from His promises (Eph. 2:11-12). However, Israel's disobedience to God led to the Gentiles receiving **mercy**.

Just as the disobedience of the Jews led to mercy for the Gentiles, the Jews would receive mercy because of the mercy shown to the Gentiles. In God's grace, disobedience led to obedience, and no mercy led to mercy. God used the disobedience of both the Jews and the Gentiles to bring mercy to both of them.

Paul used the same word **imprisoned** when he wrote to the Galatians, where he argued that Scripture had imprisoned everything under sin so the promise could be given on the basis of faith and under the law until the coming of faith (Gal. 3:22-23). Verse 32, taken out of context, has been used to argue for universalism: God imprisoned every single person so that He might show mercy to every single person. In the preceding verses, Paul had indicated how God brought mercy both to believing Gentiles and believing Jews. Here, Paul summarized how God used disobedience to achieve His mercy. The **all** must refer to both believing Gentiles and believing Jews. Those who were imprisoned in disobedience have found mercy in Christ.

In light of Paul's teaching about the partial hardening of Israel, how should the church approach unbelieving Jews?

VERSES 28-29

²⁸ Regarding the gospel, they are enemies for your advantage, but regarding election, they are loved because of the patriarchs, ²⁹ since God's gracious gifts and calling are irrevocable.

VERSES 30-32

³⁰ As you once disobeyed God but now have received mercy through their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now disobeyed, resulting in mercy to you, so that they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may have mercy on all.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ENGAGE: Before the group arrives, arrange the seating so that two seats are distinctively outside the main circle of seats. As the group arrives, without any explanation, randomly select two people to sit in the seats outside the circle. Once everyone is in place, ask the group: *When was the last time you felt like you were on the outside looking in? What emotions does that stir up in your heart and mind?* (PSG, p. 86)

TRANSITION: Point out the context of today's passage using **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Romans*) and **Pack Item 7** (*Handout: Romans Time Line*). Say: *In Romans 11, Paul informed his readers that salvation through faith in Jesus is open to everyone; no one is excluded.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: *Romans 9–11 consists of an excursus, or appendix, that focuses on the role of the Jews under the new covenant based on faith. Many Jews failed to see Jesus as the Messiah. Nevertheless, Paul believed that God had not given up on them. Paul believed that a remnant of faithful Israelites would embrace grace (11:5-6), and in time God's work among the Gentiles would convince Israel to come back to God on His terms, not their own (11:11-16).*

ILLUSTRATE: Display a small branch from a tree or shrub as a visual of the image Paul used of an olive tree. Say: *Normally a farmer would grow some cultivated olive branches to graft into a wild tree. Paul reversed the order by grafting wild branches into the trunk of the olive tree.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Romans 11:13 to identify who Paul was addressing in these verses (Gentiles). **Read Romans 11:17-21**, and ask the group to identify what is represented in Paul's use of the parts of the olive tree.

DISPLAY: Write the following on a poster or white board and add answers generated from the group: *Broken off branches* = (Jews); *Wild olive branches* = (Gentiles); *Rich root* = (God). Lead the group to explain the meaning and relationship of each part in Paul's message to the Gentiles in these verses.

DISCUSS: *Why was it important for Paul to remind the Gentile believers to refrain from boasting about their salvation?*

EXPLAIN: *Paul was reminding the Gentiles that their salvation was all about God's grace and not about anything they accomplished or contributed. The Gentiles should express gratitude instead of pride.*

ILLUSTRATE: Ask: *What is a balance scale and how does one work?* (For clarification, explain that two plates or bowls are suspended at equal distances from a pivot point; one plate holds an object of unknown weight while known objects are added to the other plate until the plates level off, which happens when the weights on the two plates are equal.)

READ: **As you read Romans 11:22-24**, invite the group to imagine a balance scale weighing two attributes of God.

DISCUSS: *What are the two attributes Paul contrasts in these verses? From the PSG (p. 91): How would you describe the balance between God's severity and His kindness? Highlight that God is not so kind that He overlooks evil and not so harsh that He condemns without cause.*

READ: Emphasize that Paul believed Israel's rejection of the gospel was not final. **As you read Romans 11:25-29**, invite the group to notice the roles the Jews and the Gentiles played in demonstrating that all people have an opportunity to receive God's salvation.

STATE: *God's plan has always been based on faith. Since God has all authority, He can graft anyone who expresses faith. God had done it for the Gentiles, and He would do it for the Jews if they would overcome their lack of faith. Paul believed that day was coming. He illustrated his belief by quoting the prophecy of Isaiah in verse 26 and further explaining in verses 28-29 how God would bring things together for good and His glory (Rom. 8:28).*

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Romans 11:30-32, instructing the group to circle in their PSGs each time Paul used the word *mercy*.

CLARIFY: Stress the Key Doctrine (God's Purpose of Grace) on page 91 of the PSG: *Election is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility (Phil. 2:5-7).* Then ask: *How does this statement impact a person's response to the question on page 92?*

HIGHLIGHT: Note that God's promises cannot be changed or altered. He is committed to following through on His restoration of the world through His grace and mercy.

DISCUSS: *How does God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus alone show His justice and mercy? From the PSG (p. 93): What does God's plans being irrevocable tell us about His character?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

CONSIDER: Instruct a volunteer to read the first bulleted point under In My Context (PSG, p. 94): *Because salvation comes through faith in Jesus alone, there is no room for arrogance expressed toward unbelievers.* Ask: *What makes religious pride so crippling and dangerous?* (PSG, p. 89)

REVIEW: Highlight Romans 11:36 as today's memory verse. Read the verse and lead the group to discuss how we can more regularly acknowledge that all things come from God. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) to any who need one.

CHALLENGE: Read the third bulleted point under In My Context (PSG, p. 94): *God is merciful to everyone, giving salvation to all who place their faith in His Son.* Lead the group to answer the second set of questions under In My Context (PSG, p. 94): *How would you rate your awareness that God's offer of salvation is made to all people? To what evidence can you point to justify your answer? What adjustments do you need to make?*

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking God to reveal opportunities during the coming days for group members to share the gospel with others. Commit to trusting the Holy Spirit to guide and equip each person to seize the moment.



PRACTICE

- Remember to contact those who have visited during this study in Romans and make sure they know they are welcome anytime.
- Follow up with anyone you shared the gospel with this past week. Encourage each person by sharing one thing you took away from this session about God's offer of salvation to every person.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an option for Focus Attention, lead the group to recall an experience when they felt unappreciated or not welcome. Without stirring deep emotions, ask if anyone would be willing to share their experience. Be prepared to set the example by sharing from your past.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement Romans 11:17, work through the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 89) and lead the group to share what they learned about the ancient practice of grafting. You could also enlist a volunteer to complete this study prior to the session and share what he or she learned during the group time.
- When discussing Romans 11:18, remind the group that Jesus made a similar statement in John 15:1-8. Instead of an olive tree, Jesus used the illustration of grape vines. Nourishment comes through the roots and not the branches.
- To enhance the discussion of Romans 11:25-32, ask: *What was God's promise to the Israelites when He initially set them apart as His chosen people?* Call for a volunteer to read Genesis 12:1-3. Explain: *The Gentiles needed to realize that Israel's rebellion was part of God's plan for bringing all kinds of people into His kingdom. God had blessed Israel so that the entire world would be blessed.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Summarize the session by reading the main headings that outline the study in the Personal Study Guide. Read the bulleted point under In My Context that supports each heading. Call for any observations learned during today's session. Close in prayer, acknowledging God's mercy and thanking God for His deep love.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Support the memory verse at the end of the hymn of praise in Romans 11:33-36 by either sharing an online presentation (search the Internet using the song title and author's name) of "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" by Stuart Townend, or reading the lyrics aloud.