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The National Presbyterian Church

The Good Surprise of an Old Promise

Romans 11

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This is now the second to last sermon in the series of sermons we have been preaching this spring on the book of Romans, Paul's greatest book. Today's sermon is boundaried by two unshakable promises - one at the end of the 8th Chapter and the other at the end of the 11th Chapter. In a way, they're like bookmarks that hold together Chapters 9, 10 and 11. The 8th Chapter ends with a tremendous song from St. Paul. He starts it with a question. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). And believe me, the people who heard that or read it could think of a lot of things that were against them during the time that Paul writes that letter. But he still says it. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" And then comes this amazing song that he writes at the end of the 8th Chapter. It almost sounds like Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" because this Romans 8 song was the New Testament text for "A Mighty Fortress": "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own son but gave him up for us all, will he not also with him give us everything else? And who will bring any charge against God's elect? It's God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" (Romans 8:31-34). By the way, that's a harsh word, to judge down, *katakrino*. It means literally, "Who has the right to say the last word down on you?" Because *kata* means down, *krino* to weigh. Who has the right to weigh you at the end? To say the last word about your life? Who has that right?

Have you ever thought about that? Do you have the right to say the last word about your life? Do your parents? Does your employer? Do your friends or enemies have the right to say the last word about your life? No. Paul answers the question. Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? Who can condemn? Paul continues:

Is it Christ Jesus, who died, [and then he answers this question] Yes. [Think of it. The only one who has the right to say the last word is Jesus Christ himself. He is the great boundary. And with that Paul breaks into song.] Is it Jesus Christ who died? Yes. Who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: [here he quotes the Old Testament prophet] For your sake we're being killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. Knowing all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, no angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:34-39).

Think of it, that non-negotiable, unshakable affirmation of St. Paul that nothing can separate you from the decision God made to love you. And that's how the 8th Chapter ends. With that ringing in our ears we think to ourselves, "What else needs to be said?" But Paul has another large question that he wants to talk about. We're grateful for that assurance, that unshakable assurance, but what about the history that is already underway? And especially what about the history and the destiny of the people of Abraham, Paul's own people, the Jews? Remember how the book of Romans began? "I'm not ashamed of the gospel; it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, the Jew first but also the Greek" (Romans 1:16). Well, Paul has been addressing the Greeks and Jews up until now in the 8th Chapter, the promise is for both. But what about the Jews? What about the Jews? The Jews first and also the Greeks.

And so Paul decides to take on that huge question in Chapters 9, 10 and 11, and that's why you must see 9, 10 and 11 all together, which we're going to do. Paul makes four great statements in Chapters 9, 10 and 11 that speak to that question. What about the story that's already underway, this history? Remember last fall we looked at the story before the grand story. We journeyed all the way from Genesis through the Old Testament to see the story of God's people. So what about that story? Paul has four statements to make. The first one comes in verse 4 of Chapter 9. He says,

They are Israelites, [referring to the Jews, his own people,] and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, [remember the promises made to Abraham, all those covenants, the giving of the Law, remember Moses?] the worship, and the promises; [remember King David? The Psalms, the book of Psalms.] To them belong the patriarchs, [remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?] And from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever, Amen (Romans 9:4-5).

He even speaks an "Amen" at that point in the 9th Chapter. That's his first great statement.

You're going to hear four of them now. Think of that history in terms of an architectural parable. Imagine a foundation, which we've just read in Romans 8 of the decision of God in our favor. God's great decision of his grace and of his lordship. Alright, imagine that as a foundation and now in your mind's eye place four pillars on that foundation. Four Doric columns. Think of it as a Greek temple where you have Doric columns that each stand parallel upon that foundation, four columns. Paul is going to make four statements now in Chapters 9, 10 and 11 that are in a sense parallel to each other. They don't easily harmonize but here they are, they're on the same foundation they have that in common. And yet they seem at least at first to stand separate from each other.

The first one, the first column is the history of promise that is the Jewish story. The story of Paul's own people. He says they're Israelites and they have God's original promise with each of the covenants that were made to them and there they are, they stand. That's why we studied the Old Testament last fall. And if you were to say, "I'm a New Testament Christian, I don't need the Old Testament," that's not true. We need that Old Testament covenant history to prepare us for the Messiah and for the New Testament. And so Paul makes that as the first great statement, the first great pillar, the first great Doric column.

Now the second one is the great good news fact of faith: Jews and Greeks alike receive this covenant by our faith. "Behold! I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I'll come in and eat with them, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). Notice, there's a freedom and responsibility sentence there. We must open the door. We must receive the grace, that's Romans 5. And so now that's the second column that Paul will place, the second Doric column is the column of faith. And some of the most beautiful things are taught about faith here in the 10th Chapter of the book of Romans. Listen to it. Paul says,

Don't say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up). But what does it [the Bible] say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because [and here comes a very famous line from St. Paul,] if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved [This is now another great Doric column.] For one believes with the heart and so is justified. And one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." [Now listen to this line. The big one now comes in.] For there is no distinction now between Jew and Greek. The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him, who have faith. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:6-13).

By the way, here he quotes two Old Testament prophets as proof texts: Hosea and Joel. So in a sense he says that these Greeks are included, these people that were originally not called my people are now my people. And we, by adoption, join in and become children of Abraham too, by faith. Just like the Jews, we receive the promise by faith. That's the second Doric column. You have to have that column.

The third column is a problem column. It's going to be hard to figure out what to do with this third one. The third column in this building is the fact that many in ancient Israel did not believe in Jesus Christ as Messiah; of course, in the first century most of the early believers were at first Jewish, but some in the family of Israel did not believe and did not receive the Messiah, and Paul knows this. He knows that some in the Jewish family of Israel did not believe in the Messiah and therefore he creates now another sort of image. They are like an olive tree, which is the original olive tree, but when the original olive tree does not receive its Messiah, the result is that the branch is broken off. And then a wild olive branch is grafted into it. In this illustration by Paul, the Greeks, the Gentiles, who are not Jewish by physical origin are now grafted in the branch. We by faith then are grafted into the original olive tree, and become then children of Abraham by faith, not by birth and not by physical legacy, but by faith legacy. Paul creates this parable as the third column which is the problem column. Listen to how he puts it. In the 11th Chapter. He says,

The original olive tree stumbles and that means riches for the world, and if their defeat it means riches for the Gentiles, ... If some of the branches are broken off, [referring now this is the third column,] you, a wild olive shoot, are grafted in to their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, don't boast over the branches. If you boast, remember that you are not supported by

yourself, but by the root. [That's why we must not say that we don't need the Old Testament. You need the Old Testament as the underpinning for your faith. It's the root that supports you.] *And you will say, 'Well, the branches were broken off, [referring to the old olive tree,] so that I might be grafted in.'* [And Paul says,] *Yes, that's true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but now you stand only through your faith. So don't be proud, but stand in awe* (Romans 11:12-20).

So now the third column is the third great statement of Paul. It is this discontinuity of the original people who do not believe in the fulfillment of their own promises. The first is the fact of the original promises. The second column says that all people, Jews and Greeks alike need faith to receive the promise of salvation. The third column tells us that those who don't receive salvation by faith are broken off. Well, now it looks like that he's finished with his argument. Now we can build the house. We have the three columns, and they make sense. We could build a house even with the problem column, except he has one more column. He has one more Doric column to add. Listen to it. It's also in the 11th Chapter. "Now, if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (Romans 11:12). Get ready for a fourth column.

So that you may not be claimed to be wiser than you are, [this is now the verse 25 Chapter 11,] brothers and sisters, Paul says, I want you to understand a mystery: [Paul is now going to treat this fourth column as a mystery.] I want you to understand a mystery: a hardening came to part of Israel, until the full number of Gentiles would hear the Gospel. But all Israel will be saved; as it is written, 'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; and he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.' And thus my covenant will come, and I will take away their sins.' As regards the gospel right now they're enemies for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their forefathers; [God will not go back on the promise he makes. Remember when we read the promise of Romans 8? We called that an irrevocable promise. An unshakable promise. "Nothing can separate you from the decision God made to love you." That is the end of Romans 8. Now notice the promise at the end of Romans 11.] The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you once were disobedient to God and have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have been disobedient in order that, by mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. All Israel will be saved (Romans 11:25-31).

That's the promise. How is God going to do it? How is it possible that the

four columns will resolve? You have the one column that's easy, the great promises. And you have the second column that tells us that our faith is needed. The third column where there isn't faith, a breaking occurs, a discontinuity occurs. And now the fourth column affirms that God is still going to save Israel.

By the way, I want to point out something about this prophetic promise in Romans 11. Paul is not talking about the geographical restoration of Israel. It's too bad that prophetic movements, especially Protestant prophetic movements in the last century confused that. And some still teach it, that when the Israelis returned to the Holy Land in 1946 that that was the fulfillment of the promise. No. This is not the grand promise to Israel. The prophetic promise is here in Romans 11. It is the salvation of Israel, not geographic land recovery. In fact, in the New Testament, the kingdom teaching of Jesus is not about geography. It has everything to do with relationship with Christ. It is the kingly reign of Christ in our lives. That is what the kingdom hope in the New Testament means. It is relationship of Christ; that's the promise. The promise to Israel is the promise of salvation. God is not writing off the synagogue. He is not finished even with the synagogue in disobedience. Even the synagogue that has not received the Messiah, God will keep his promise first made to Abraham.

A benediction will follow that promise. The promise is that God is going to resolve and complete the promise. But how are we to put all four of those pillars together? They seem to be in contrast to each other. They're parallel. They seem to stand separately, but in contrast. How can they come together? I have a parable that I'm going to share with you now.

430 years before Christ the most beautiful building in the world was designed and built in Athens. It's still standing. On the acropolis of Athens is the Parthenon. There is no building to match the Parthenon. Most architects would agree with that. It is a totally perfect building: eight 34 foot columns in the front and 17 columns along each side. It's a rectangular building and it is absolutely spectacular because the architect who designed it 400 years before Christ was a genius. He knew that temples built in Greece at that time created a funny effect if you looked at them. In fact, go to Corinth and see the temple to Apollo. I've been there and it looks funny. You see the columns are all parallel, but with the capital on top of the columns, the temple has the effect that it looks like it's bulging outward. That's the way it looks when you look at it. It's not very beautiful. And then at Athens you see the Parthenon and it is totally spectacular. Why? Because the architect

who designed the Parthenon realized that every one of those pillars had to lean inward. Every pillar in the Parthenon, (you can't tell it when you look at it because they look parallel,) but they're leaning inward. And therefore when the capital was put on the top the building it did not look like it was bulging outward, it looked perfect. Perfect, because every pillar is leaning inward.

Now here's my parable. If you were in your imagination to take every one of those pillars and extend them about 75 miles into the sky you would see that they will all converge finally at some distant place. That's where they'll resolve. They will resolve, but not the way you can now see it. God will resolve these four great truths, as Paul says, and he calls it a mystery. God will resolve it. Each theme will stay intact because you can't please God without faith, and yet he'll keep the promise to Israel and he honors each covenant. They're irrevocable. He will hold them. He holds on. He also preserves our integrity and preserves his integrity, and somehow all four columns that now appear to be in contrast, all of them will resolve. It may take about 80 miles in the sky to do it, but they will resolve. God knows how to do the resolving. With that, Paul decides to end with a benediction. Listen to this benediction. It shows you that he himself is baffled by the whole thing. Listen to it.

"O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Here he quotes Isaiah 40.) "Or who is then his counselor?" (Now he quotes Job.) "Or who is given a gift to God and now has God in obligation to him?" (Romans 11:33-35). In other words nobody can control God. God does what he chooses to do. Karl Barth has a great line – "No harm must be done to our freedom and no harm must be done to God's freedom. God can do what he chooses to do."¹ And he'll surprise us all.

There will be many surprises when we get to heaven, and we see who's there, because God can do what he wants to do. He knows how to do it, to preserve our faith, preserve our integrity, to preserve his integrity, to preserve his promises. And then he ends with this great line. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever! Amen" (Romans 11:36). These three chapters conclude with good news. It means that God is not finished with Israel. He's not finished with the synagogue, thank God. This should rule out all anti-Semitism. In fact, Karl Barth has a line in his book, *Dogmatics in Outline*, where he tells about Frederick the Great who was an atheist. And Frederick the Great once said

to his physician Herr Von Zimmerman, and he said, "Von Zimmerman, give me one proof for the existence of God." And Von Zimmerman answered to the atheist Frederick the Great, "Why, the Jews, my Emperor."² The Jews, they survived. It's a proof of the existence of God. God is not finished with the synagogue. And God is not finished with you. He's not finished with me. There's no one that he's finished with. And that's good news, that's good news. And that's the way Paul decides to end the 11th Chapter. Next week, we start the 12th Chapter. How do we then live in a world like Nero's world? And that's the 12th through 16th Chapters of Romans.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text, it takes us by surprise. It takes our breath away, to hear these two wonderful irrevocable promises that tell about your freedom but also tell about our freedom, the need for our faith, all these wonderful themes. And thank you Lord, that you know how to resolve each theme. We thank you for that. We thank you that no one's story is over, you're at work and you know how to find us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford University Press, 1968.

2 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Harper Perennial, 1959.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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