

Sermons through

Romans

Their Failure, Their Fullness

Part One

Stumble But Not Fall

Romans 11:11-15

With Study Questions

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12/6/2015*

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I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles. ¹² Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! ¹³ For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴ if by any means I may provoke to jealousy *those who are my flesh* and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their being cast away *is* the reconciling of the world, what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead (Romans 11:11-15)?

Introduction

It is quite the cliché that the Lord works in mysterious ways. Yet it is not altogether unbiblical. In this very chapter Paul desires his readers not be ignorant of the mysterious providential workings of God. A mystery is not a contradiction, nor is it merely an escape clause for something inexplicable. It is generally referring to something unknown or unanticipated then revealed or disclosed (Romans 16:25, 26; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3). A mystery movie or book would be quite unsatisfying if it ended still being a mystery.

And the unanticipated action will often run contrary to what we might consider to be the most natural course of action. I do find things emotionally vexing as I observe what happens in the world, in our nation, in my own community and even among my own friends and church family. Things don't always unfold the way I might prefer or the way which seems most reasonable or expeditious to me.

Whether it's the hard-heartedness of unbelievers or stubbornness of fellow Christians or my own ethical and intellectual shortcomings, I think to myself:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me (Psalm 13:1, 2)?

So often I am tempted take counsel in my own “soul”, to navigate through my culture, friends and self through my own psychological ability to find some peace in the anarchy. The Psalm concludes with David finding solace, not in a specific answer, but in Christ Himself.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. ⁶ I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me (Psalm 13:5, 6).

Let us not, in our study of this passage, lose sight of the troubled spirit draped over Paul’s heart in these very meaty chapters of Romans. He is defending the very trustworthiness of God (Romans 9:6) while his heart aches for his apostate fellow Israelite countrymen (Romans 9:3; 10:1; 11:14), though his specific ministry was to the gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; Galatians 1:16; 2:7-9; Ephesians 3:8).

He will begin to reveal the providential works of God as it speaks to the ethnic Israelite, the Israelite of promise and the gentiles. It also shows that God is indeed faithful to His covenant. And in so doing Paul finds a comfort which yields the inevitable doxology.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God (Romans 11:33)!

When the Lord reveals His wise and mighty hand, our response should be a doxology (to burst forth in worship and glory).

The great comfort of the Christian – the heart of our peace – is that we serve a covenant making-covenant keeping God. And regardless of how things might appear at any given time in our lives or history, His hand is not too short to accomplish His purpose (Numbers 11:23) and no intention of His can be thwarted (Job 42:2). And His own children are at the heart of His power and plans.

And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22, 23).

So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

So what is the providential working which leads to the doxology? As you may recall, Paul is making a distinction between the Israel of promise and ethnic Israel. Or to put it in his words,

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they *are not all Israel who are of Israel*, ⁷ nor *are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham* (Romans 9:6, 7).

God has certainly kept His covenant promise to the true Israel – those Israelites who, like Paul, pursued righteousness by faith and not by the works of the law (Romans 9:30-32). The Father sent His Son into the midst of a very religious community – the covenant community and instead of embracing the fulfillment of the promise, they stumbled over Him and He became a rock of offense (Romans 9:33).

It makes you wonder how today's religious communities would fare. Would the true Christ be a welcomed guest in our houses of worship or would he be considered a rebel and an inconvenience?

Be that as it may, the Israelites, for the most part wanted nothing of Jesus. There was a remnant of faithful believers within Israel (Romans 11:2-5) but what of the rest? Paul rhetorically asks,

I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not (Romans 11:11a)!

Unredeemable

What does it mean that they hadn't "**stumbled**" that they should "**fall**"? What is the difference between a mere stumble and a falling? In

short to **“fall”** means to reach a point of no return—to be in an unredeemable condition. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine with any degree of accuracy who has crossed this boundary. We know that blasphemy **“against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:29)**. This appears to happen when one assigns to the devil those things which were the works of the Spirit.¹

John also writes of a **“sin that leads to death”** and how we should not pray for that (1 John 5:16). The author of Hebrews also speaks of those who have participated in spiritual activities among the people of God and then **“fall away”** that it is **“impossible...to renew them again to repentance” (Hebrews 6:4-6)**.

Peter writes of a similar example.

For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. ²²What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire” (2 Peter 2:21, 22).

Perseverance?

Some may ask how this speaks to the perseverance of the saints. The answer is not terribly difficult. As we discussed earlier, one must recognize when the Scriptures speak individually and when they speak corporately. One might address a community of the saints (as is the case with so many epistles), but that does not mean all within that community are truly regenerate (born again). That is as true with the church as it was with Israel.

A Bad Day?

In all of this talk of falling away, one might be concerned that they have a bad day and commit the unforgiveable sin. And some discuss whether or not the unredeemable condition is a result of God’s unwillingness to redeem man or man’s unwillingness to repent. In its own

¹ Some believe this sin could only have happened during the life of Christ and the apostles.

way, it includes both, but what is important for us to note is that God will never turn away a repentant sinner.

4. As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; (Rom. 6:23, Rom. 5:12, Matt. 12:36) so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent. (Isa. 55:7, Rom. 8:1, Isa. 1:16, 18)²

In short, anyone who is willing to call upon the name of the Lord has not stumbled that they should fall.

Hope For Israel

Of course the Apostle is writing here of a corporate entity. Ethnic Israel – Israel as a nation – had not stumbled that they should fall. There was still hope for them; Paul himself being an example. They had not reached that level that Sodom had reached (this may very well have been the concern since Paul had earlier compared them to Sodom – Romans 9:29).

Sodom was a nation which stumbled that they should fall. They were entirely unredeemable. One think of Abraham's negotiating with God – if there were 50, 45, 30, 20 or even 10 righteous, there would have been hope for Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33). But the Scriptures become explicit regarding Sodom's full commitment to ungodliness.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. ⁵ And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them" (Genesis 19:4, 5).

As you know, Sodom was entirely destroyed (Genesis 19:25) and Israel would soon find themselves the object of God's judgment. Within 15 years of the writing of this epistle, their temple would be destroyed and their culture under severe siege (Matthew 24), but they would not have the destiny of a Sodom. They would continue as a people with the hope of

² *The Westminster confession of faith.* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

redemption – if they would abandon their works righteousness and rely entirely upon grace through faith in the Promised Messiah. Their hope would be the same as any sinner's hope – the hope of grace.

The Apostle will now turn to explain the mystery – a mystery which includes the provocation of jealousy – the value of their failure and the joy of their acceptance. We will pursue that in our next meeting.

Questions for Study

1. What does it mean that the Lord works in mysterious ways? What is a mystery (pages 2, 3)?
2. Do you find events in your life or world often run contrary to your expectations or hope? Where do you find peace or hope (pages 2, 3)?
3. What troubled the Apostle Paul? What led to the doxology (pages 3, 4)?
4. Would Jesus be welcomed into your religious community? What concerns do you see surfacing if that were to happen (page 4)?
5. Discuss the notion of what it means to be unredeemable (pages 4, 5)?
6. How does falling away (Hebrews 6:4-6) interact with the perseverance of the saints (page 5)?
7. How would a person know they have not fallen into an unredeemable condition (pages 5, 6)?
8. How had Israel become like Sodom? How were they unlike Sodom? Why was there still hope for them? Where did their hope lie (pages 6, 7)?