

Every year on Good Friday, we pray what's called the Bidding Prayer. And it's an easy enough prayer to recognize, because it always starts the same way. It says, "Let us pray for." For example, "Let us pray for the whole Christian church," or "Let us pray for the ministers of the Word." It's something that we do every single year. But there's one prayer which we include in that prayer, that we do here, but a lot of churches across the country don't. And that prayer is a prayer for the conversion of the Jews. It goes like this: "Let us pray for the Jews, that God would remove the veil from their hearts, so that they too may acknowledge Jesus Christ our Lord. Almighty and Everlasting God, who loves to show mercy, hear the prayers which we offer unto You for Your ancient people, the Jews, that, acknowledging Jesus Christ, who is the Light of truth, they may be delivered from their darkness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen." And the reason why I think a lot of churches don't pray that prayer is because some are probably afraid that they're going to be called anti-Semitic or something like that. But there's also plenty of churches that probably just don't care as much anymore. They don't feel a need to pray for the conversion of the Jews. But honestly, it's a good prayer, and it's one that we should pray. And we pray this so that they would believe in Jesus, because we want them to become Christians just like us. And the reason why we do this and we ask this, is because of our reading from Romans chapter 11. Because Paul tells us that Israel has been hardened, but not forever. God can graft them back in again. God can bring them back to faith in him, and that's what we want to happen. That's what we pray would happen: that the Jews would become Christians with us.

And Paul begins this section by asking, is Israel totally rejected because of God's choice? By no means! Because if Israel had been totally rejected, if none of them were supposed to believe because of their sin, then even Paul should not be a believer. Because Paul is also an Israelite, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and he believes in Jesus. He is proof that God has not entirely rejected Israel from believing in him. God had saved some of them, including Paul, through his rich mercy in his Son, Jesus Christ.

And Paul points back to 1 Kings chapter 19 to prove this point, because he points back to Elijah who was hiding in Mount Horeb. Elijah had run away from Jezebel, who had threatened to kill him because he had killed all of the prophets of Baal. And Jezebel said she was going to do the same thing to him. Elijah had been so bold before, so unafraid, but now he fears for his life. And so he ran away to Horeb, which is Mount Sinai, where God gave the law to Moses. And he cried out to God and said, "God, I'm the only one left! Everyone else in Israel doesn't believe in you. They've torn down your altars. They've killed your prophets. And they're even trying to kill me. It seems like there is no hope for Israel at all." But God says that wasn't true. God still had seven thousand in Israel who still belonged to him. Seven thousand who still believed, seven thousand who had not bent the knee to Baal. And the fact that there was still seven thousand in Israel, this small part of Israel at that time, showed that God had not entirely rejected his people. And in the same way, in Paul's time, that small remnant, that faithful few showed that God had not entirely rejected Israel either. They were still part of God's promise, because God had kept them for himself.

Of course, that doesn't change the fact that many of them did fall away. Yes, there was that faithful few, that faithful remnant of Israel, but so many of them still stumbled because of Jesus. They did not believe in him. And Paul quotes Isaiah chapter 29 and Psalm 69 to show this. God had handed them over because of their sins, so that they would be hardened, so that they would

stumble because of Jesus. But why had this happen? That was a question that still needed an answer. Why had Israel stumbled because of Jesus? What was the purpose of it all?

Paul tells us: it's so that the Gospel would come to us, the Gentiles. Because Israel stumbled, Paul brought that good news to all the nations of the world, so that they too would hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For example, in Acts chapter 13, we hear this: "And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly," to the Jews, that is, "saying, 'It was necessary that the Word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.'" So the sin of Israel, then, became the occasion that God used to bring the Gospel to us.

Now, I want to make something very clear here. This is a very great mystery, one that shows the great wisdom of God. And being a great mystery, we need to be careful with it, so that we don't get the wrong idea. But what we have happening here is that Israel stumbled because of Jesus. They stumbled into unbelief and turned away from him. They were hardened in their sin. But because of that sin, salvation has come to us. God has brought us into the Church ahead of Israel. Because God has sent his Gospel out into the whole world so that all the nations might come and become part of his kingdom, even while the sons of the kingdom were cast out. Jesus himself says, Matthew chapter 8: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Israel stumbled so that we would be saved.

But this also happened to make Israel jealous, as Paul says. They would be jealous to see all of these nations enter into the kingdom before them. Because the promises which were made to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob were made to his Church, and we have become part of that Church. This is what God was always going to do, after all. The Church is all of those who believe in God, all of those who believe in Jesus. To put it another way, all the saints of the Old Testament were Christians before Christ. It's that simple. We are all one in God. But what has happened here is that those who did not know God, those who were totally outside his Church, have now become his people. They have gone into the kingdom ahead of Israel. Israel can become part of this once more, Paul says. They've not stumbled beyond all hope. But their stumbling has become the way that God has chosen to bring us in, to bring in the fullness of all the nations, the total number of all who would believe. Salvation has come to us because of the disobedience of Israel.

But all of that should not make us proud, Christians. What happened to Israel is not something that can only happen to them. If they stumbled and fell, so can we. And to prove this point, Paul uses the image of a great tree. Technically an olive tree, but if you need to picture some other kind of tree to see it, that's fine. Picture an apple tree if you have to. But this great tree has many, many branches. But some of these branches are completely dead. The tree itself is the Church, the promises which were made to Abraham. And the branches on this tree are the descendants of Abraham, at least according to the flesh. But the ones which are dead are those who did not believe in Jesus. They stumbled and fell away because of their unbelief. And God has pruned away these dead branches, because if you're going to be a part of the tree, you have to have faith. Faith in Jesus is what makes us a descendent of Abraham, a true Israelite. But now that God has

trimmed away all of these old branches, he's grafted in new ones, taken from wild trees, from other trees that have never been part of the orchard of God. And he has made them a part of this tree by faith. That's us. Those who did not know God, those who were not part of the natural descendants of Abraham. We have been made part of the tree, part of the promise made to Abraham through faith in Jesus.

And we're not there because we deserved it. We're not there because we somehow earned the right to be there. We are there by the grace of God. And if the natural branches were cut off because of unbelief, Christians, we must not be proud. We must not think that we somehow deserve to be there. Because faith is what matters. Faith is what makes us a part of this tree, part of the Church. And God can bring all of those old, dead branches in again, when they believe in Jesus Christ.

Because it is all too easy to be proud, Christians. It is all too easy to forget that we are here today in the Church by faith. It's all too easy to say, "God chose me--me!--to be saved, so I don't need to worry about anybody else." It's all too easy for us to say that "God made me a part of the tree, but I don't really have time to tell anybody else about Jesus." It is all too easy to say, "I believe in Jesus, and therefore I deserve God's grace more." But that's not true. If we are part of this tree, we are part of it by faith. And if God cut off the original branches of this tree, why would we be any different?

So Paul tells us, "Don't be proud, but fear. Fear him who grafted us into the tree by his choice alone!" But this fear is a good thing, Christians, because it takes away our pride. It causes us to recognize that we are here by grace alone. And when we remember that, we are not going to think that we're somehow special or different or immune to any of these things. We will recognize that we are there because of Jesus, and then we will want to tell more people that they too would become part of this tree by faith. Because God has not created an exclusive club for the select few. God has created his Church, the refuge for all of those who believe in Jesus Christ.

So this, then, is why we pray for the conversion of the Jews on Good Friday. We do so because we want them to become Christians. We want them to be saved, to turn from their darkness and believe in Jesus Christ. Because we are not here because we somehow deserve it. We are here by faith. God has made us part of this tree by faith. And God can make Israel part of this tree once more by faith. And we pray also for all unbelievers, that they all would come and know Jesus Christ by faith. Because God has created us to be one Church, one tree in Jesus Christ, our Lord. That's what we pray for, and what we should always pray for, that we would all be one in God.

Let us pray. Almighty and everlasting God, who loves to show mercy, hear the prayers which we offer unto you for your ancient people, the Jews, that acknowledging Jesus Christ, who is the light of truth, they may be delivered from their darkness; and hear us also for all those who do not believe in you, that they would turn away from their darkness to you, the true and living God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.