

August 16, 2026

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32 “The Plan”

Here’s a rundown of what we’ve been talking about for the last several weeks. I hesitate to call what we’ve been doing a “series” because I’ve just been following the lectionary, but I’m seeing a pattern.

I think this started back when we visited Abraham and Sara from our time in Genesis. The takeaway from that passage is **“God called a people.”** The next thing we learned when we started looking at Romans was **“God gave these chosen people the Law.”** Paul reminded his readers that the Law wasn’t just a list of rules to earn God’s favor. It was a part of God’s covenant relationship with Israel. Then Paul stated that **“Humanity couldn’t live up to this Law.”** This was a problem. Jews and Gentiles had both fallen short. And yet, God’s response was not to abandon them. That’s when Paul explained the **“scandal of grace.”** God welcomes Gentiles into the family. And since “Gentiles” means “anyone who is not Jewish,” that’s just another way of saying, **“All means all.”** But what does that mean for Israel? Has God rejected Israel? Has God’s plan failed? Now here we are in Romans 11. And I suppose if I wanted to cut things short I could just quote verse two and say, **“No. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.”** Then we can go to fellowship time fifteen minutes early. But that wouldn’t be fair to you *or* the larger message that Paul is trying to communicate here. See, *Paul* has a plan. Or more accurately, Paul wants to make sure people understand *God’s* plan.

Some of you might be thinking, “Well I sure hope *Paul* tells us about God’s plan, because I’m tired of people telling me ‘oh, it’s all a part of God’s plan’ when my life is falling apart.” Doesn’t that just drive you crazy? Any time something inexplicable happens, especially if it’s not in our favor, people’s first response is, “Oh, I guess it’s just part of God’s plan.” Or I guess I should say that’s the first thought for people who *aren’t* facing tragedy. Let’s say you find out that you have cancer, and you think, “Why? I’ve lived a healthy life. I’ve done all the right things

that are supposed to prevent cancer – I don't smoke, I don't eat processed foods, I don't drink, I don't even drink out of plastic bottles, and yet here I am fighting cancer!" So we ask, "Why?!" And then some well-meaning friend or relative comes along and says, "Wow. Sorry to hear about the bad news. I'm sure this is all just a part of God's plan."

What ... the ... heck? Who says this? Who even thinks this? It upsets me to no end. And you can only imagine how much it upsets my wife, the chaplain and grief counselor! What upsets me even more is when someone dies and folks say, "Well I guess it was just a part of God's plan. Our ways aren't God's ways." Or my least favorite, "God just needed another angel up in heaven." That isn't even remotely biblical! Or how about when someone is suffering in poverty, and a well-meaning person comes along and says, "Don't worry, God has a plan for you." Okay, using that logic are you saying that God *planned* this person's poverty? Now ... I'm sure folks who say things like this think that they're helping, but they're really just making the suffering *worse*!

So what *is* God's plan then? Does God's plan involve a detailed blueprint in which every murder, cancer diagnosis, war, betrayal, accident, or tragedy was deliberately and divinely scripted? Now, some would say, "Well of course. God is God. God is in control. God is sovereign." Here's something I want you to take home with you – and I want you to share this every time some well-meaning person wants to imply that someone who died tragically is a part of "God's plan." **God's sovereignty does not require us to believe that God is the author of every terrible thing that happens.** Full stop. Because there is a difference between saying, "Everything that happens is God's will" and "Nothing that happens can ultimately defeat God's will." God's plan isn't that everything that happens was planned by God. God's plan is what God is doing about it.

Well thank you, Pastor Kearns for leading us through this fascinating theological exercise. But what do we do with this? Glad you asked, because I think what's going on here is that we aren't asking, "What do I

believe about God's plan?" I think what we're asking is, "What kind of people are we becoming if we believe that God's purpose is grace and mercy?" Because that's what we've been talking about for the last two weeks. Let me tell you, Romans is a *messy* letter. There is *so* much to plow through. Israel. Gentiles. Law, faith, disobedience, God's promises, salvation. Paul is trying to explain to people about *what God is doing*. And Paul knows this is a lot. Finally, in verse 33-36 he throws up his hands – not in frustration but in worship. He says, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" In other words, "I can't explain all of this. But I can worship the God who is at work in it."

So maybe that's the point. Maybe faith isn't about "knowing the plan." Maybe faith is about trusting the One whose purposes are greater than anything we can see or understand. We don't know why some people get sick and others don't. We don't know why some people live in abundance while others struggle just to survive. We don't know why some relationships last a lifetime and others fall apart. We don't know why some people live to be ninety-five and others die at twenty-five. And I'm not going to stand up here and pretend that I have some secret insight into the mind of God that can explain all of that. I don't. Paul didn't either. He ends this whole complicated argument by saying, "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" In other words, there are some things about God that we simply cannot know.

But there *is* something we *do* know. Paul has spent these chapters wrestling with all of this—Israel, Gentiles, law, faith, disobedience, salvation, God's promises—and where does he land? He always lands on mercy. "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." That's what Paul can see. That's what he can trust. God's purpose is mercy. God's method is grace.

And if that's true, then maybe the question isn't, "What is God's plan for my life?" Maybe the better question is, "What is God doing in the world, and how can I be a part of it?" Where is God bringing healing? Where is

God bringing reconciliation? Where is God restoring something that has been broken? Where is there suffering that I can help relieve? Where is there someone who needs mercy, and what would it look like for me to be the person who offers it?

Because I think that's what it means to trust God's plan. It doesn't mean sitting back and assuming that everything that happens must have been exactly what God *wanted* to happen. It means believing that even in a broken world, God is still at work. God is still healing. God is still restoring. God is still calling people. God is still extending grace. And God is *still* inviting *us* to be part of that work. We may never understand the whole plan. We may never know why some things happen the way they do. And that's okay. But we *can* know the character of the God who is at work. And Paul tells us what that character looks like: mercy.

So here's something else I want you to take home with you this morning: **You don't have to understand God's plan to participate in God's purpose.** We may not know everything God is doing, but we know what God is about. God is about mercy. God is about grace. God is about healing what is broken and restoring what has been lost. And if that's God's work in the world, then that's the work *to which we are called*. We don't have to have all the answers. We don't have to explain every tragedy. We don't have to tell people that everything happens for a reason. Sometimes all we need to do is show up, sit with someone in their grief, feed someone who is hungry, stand beside someone who is hurting, forgive someone who has hurt us, welcome someone who has been pushed away, and offer a little grace in a world that needs it but doesn't always show it. We may not understand the plan. But we know the purpose. And we can join God in that purpose.

And maybe that's why Paul finally stops trying to explain it and simply worships: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" From God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen.