



## Ransom Captive Israel – Part 3

### Advent Series

Romans 11:25-36

David Sunday

December 17, 2017

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Today we'll be reading Romans 11:25-36. Let's worship God as we hear His Word at the end of this really profound portion of the book of Romans, which in itself is probably the most profound letter in the New Testament. This is God's Holy Word:

*<sup>25</sup> Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. <sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,*

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;*

*<sup>27</sup> “and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.”*

*<sup>28</sup> As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.*

*<sup>29</sup> For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*

*<sup>33</sup> Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

*<sup>34</sup> “For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”*

*<sup>35</sup> “Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”*

*<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*

Let's pray.

Lord, thank You. It is our desire that You be glorified through our lives, through our church. We thank You that You have included us in this amazing plan of salvation that spans

from eternity past into eternity future. We're so grateful that we are Your people, that we are known by You and loved by You. We pray that You would help us understand a little bit better today what is beyond our ability to comprehend. We pray that we would grasp a little bit more the depth of the riches of Your wisdom and knowledge and the mercy You have shown us in Jesus. I pray for the empowerment of Your Holy Spirit upon my preaching today and upon our hearing of the Word. Apart from You, Lord, we cannot do anything. We need You, Holy Spirit, to take these words and pierce our hearts with them. May they penetrate into the depths of our being and transform us. We ask for Your help and thank You that You are here. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Let's start where we left off last week. We heard from Vaughan Roberts that no matter who you talk to, no matter what their religious background is, if you ask most people, "How do you get right with God?" the answer will begin with three letters: MER. Most people would end that word with the letters IT—MERIT. They say we get right with God by being very moral, by praying or by regularly going to church, synagogue, mass or the mosque. It would be by giving of ourselves through charity. We get right with God by what we do—through merit. That's what most people think. Deep down inside, the heart of man has this fear: "I'd better watch out. I'd better not pout, because God's making a list and He's checking it twice. He's going to find out who's naughty or nice. I'd better be right with God through my merits."

But the gospel brings much better news than that. The gospel says no one gets right with God by MERIT. The only way to get right with God is through MERCY. God did not check to see if we had been bad or good before He sent His Christmas gift to us, His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew we were bad. While we were still sinners, He sent His Son to live and die for us. That's mercy. So getting right with God starts by recognizing, "I have failed. I have ruined myself through sin. I cannot consistently do what is right. I lack the strength or even the motivation to achieve a righteousness that is acceptable to God. I can't get right with God through my own merit. I need mercy from God, for I am a sinner."

At the most basic level, a Christian is someone who is regularly crying out to God, "Oh, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I need Your mercy." One of my favorite songs that we've learned here this year says this:

What love could remember no wrongs we have done  
Omniscient, all-knowing, He counts not their sum  
Thrown into a sea without bottom or shore  
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more

[From "His Mercy is More" by Matt Papa]

I want us to praise the Lord for His mercy today. I want us to see how His heart is throbbing with mercy as we come to the end of this chapter. I want us to see that God is not a mercy miser. He does not withhold His mercy from those who trust in Him. I want us to adore Him for three facets of His mercy: the mystery of His merciful plan, the vastness of His merciful plan and the depth of His mercy.

### **The Mystery of God's Merciful Plan (Romans 11:25-29)**

Let's begin with the mystery of God's merciful plan. Paul starts in verse 25 saying, "I don't want you to be ignorant. I don't want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers and sisters." When we're ignorant of God's plans of mercy, there's a danger that our ignorance will cause us to become proud or conceited. We would be wise in our own sight. Paul's aware of this danger and says, "I don't want you to be wise in your own eyes. I don't want you to become conceited. I don't want you to be arrogant about God's mercy. I want you to understand something about God's ways here."

So if you care about cultivating humility in your life and if you want to grow more compassionate, humble, worshipful and grateful to God for your salvation, Paul says there's a mystery here that you need to understand. Especially if you're a Gentile Christian (a non-Jew), you need to understand God's plan for the Jewish people.

You might think, "Isn't that just a little bit obscure, a little bit irrelevant for us here in December 2017 in St. Charles. I've got bills to pay. I've got kids to raise. I've got gifts to shop for. I've got work to do." So you're secretly tuning out today. You might even have your iPhone open to what looks like the Bible app, but notifications are popping up and you're tempted to just check out and think, "You know what? I'm not sure this really relates to my life. Why do I, the week before Christmas, need to know about God's plan for the Jewish people? What does that have to do with my life?"

One reason you need to know is because when you go to the shopping malls, you're probably going to hear songs like this: "Noel, noel. Born is the King of Israel." What does that mean—the King of Israel? Or we sing, "O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel." We miss a vital part of the Christmas message if we forget what Simeon—that aged saint at the temple—said as he held the Baby Jesus in his arms. What did he say? "Lord, now You're letting Your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen Your salvation according to Your Word, a salvation You promised for all nations. Jesus is a light of revelation for the Gentiles and He is for the glory of Your people Israel."

What's troubling Paul in this chapter is why were so many of the Jewish people blind to the glory of their Messiah? If Jesus is the glory of His people Israel, why—when He came to His own—did so many of His own not receive Him? If you're a Gentile Christian and the light of the glory of God has shown into your heart in the face of Jesus Christ, you now see Christ as the One Whom God has revealed to be your Savior. You believe in Him and You see the glory of God in Him. Paul is concerned that we not start thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think; that we would not be giving credit to ourselves for our faith.

God did not save us in order to flatter our egos. He didn't save us so that we could set ourselves as superior to other people who are not saved. He saved us to amaze us with the riches of His mercy. If we are amazed with the riches of His mercy, we will long for as many people as possible to experience that mercy. We'll care about the salvation of all people, including the Jewish people. We should care about this mystery that Paul is going to reveal here.

It's a mystery in three parts:

Part number one is that we are living in a time of salvation history when the majority of the Jewish people have been hardened toward their Messiah. Not all of them, but most of them. Israel by and large is in a spiritual paralysis right now when it comes to faith in Jesus. We see that in the middle of verse 25, *"a partial hardening has come upon Israel."*

The second part of the mystery is that God has a merciful purpose in this partial hardening, because through the hardening of Israel salvation is spreading widely throughout the world and many Gentiles are coming to faith in Christ. Do you see that phrase, *"until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in"*? God has saved a people for Himself from all the nations. This partial hardening is going on right now, but the fullness of the Gentiles are coming in. They're trusting in Jesus.

Remember this, by the way, whenever you get discouraged with the state of the church as you see it. It's true that the church goes through periods of decline. I love this sentence by Andrew Wilson. Sometimes you find something valuable on Twitter and this was a good one: "Saying that the church is in decline is like saying that it's raining in Asia. It's always true somewhere. It's never true everywhere." We need to remember that today. There are places right now in our world where massive amounts of people are coming to faith in Jesus Christ, where the church of Jesus Christ is growing in the midst of much adversity and persecution.

In fact, Tom and Janice Paver are here today. They are our gospel partners serving with Operation Mobilization in Georgie. One of the things I appreciate about them is that they are so passionate about what God is doing around the world with all the nations; they're always talking

about the work of the gospel as it advances through the world. At the end of the service today, Tom will be giving us a report for our encouragement.

“Saying that the church is in decline is like saying it’s raining in Asia—always true somewhere, never true everywhere.” Jesus is building His church. God has a merciful purpose. Gentiles are coming into His Body.

Then the third part of this mystery is that this hardening of Israel, this hardening of the Jews toward their Messiah, is partial but not final. It’s not the end of the story. Paul says that once the fullness of the Gentiles has come, “*in this way all Israel will be saved*” (verse 26). This is an astonishing verse. It should take your breath away. “*In this way all Israel will be saved.*”

What does this mean? It’s one of the most disputed and controversial verses in the New Testament. I want to speak to what is clear and edifying and promoting of worship today, because for Paul, this is a doctrine that is meant to lead us to doxology. It’s meant to lead us to praise and worship of God. No matter what we may believe about different compelling interpretations of this phrase—“*all Israel will be saved*”—we can all agree on this: God’s mercy is amazing. It’s breath-taking.

When Paul says, “all Israel,” who does he have in view? Who is Israel in verse 26? Some Christians believe that Paul is referring to all the elect, chosen remnant of Israel throughout all time. Others would argue that “all Israel” refers to the full number of Jews and Gentiles whom God has chosen for salvation. I think we can all agree that that’s true in a sense. I believe though that Paul is referring here to ethnic Israel—to the Jewish people—in contrast to the Gentiles.

Now, there are places in the Bible, like Galatians 6:16, where Paul refers to Jews and Gentiles together as “the Israel of God.” We together are God’s people. Paul definitely affirms in Romans 4 that everyone who shares the faith of Abraham is a child of Abraham. So if you are a believer in Jesus—whether you’re a Jew or a Gentile—you are a full inheritor of all the covenant promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the forefathers. In that sense, all of us who believe in Jesus are true Jews. We see this at the end of Romans 2. We are true Jews if we have faith in Jesus.

So, God does not have two separate peoples, two separate tracks. There is one people of God comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. There is only one olive tree, only one way of salvation—through faith in Jesus Christ—and whoever trusts in Jesus becomes an inheritor of the promises God made to Israel, because Jesus is the One Who fulfills the hope of Israel. So if you’re connected to Jesus, you’re connected to all the promises of the New Testament.

I do believe that here in Romans 11, when Paul speaks about Israel, he’s referring specifically to the Jewish people. When he says, “*all Israel will be saved,*” it’s important that we

understand how they will be saved. Paul tells us how in the middle of verse 26, quoting from the prophet Isaiah and saying, “Here’s how it’s going to happen.”

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;  
“and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.”*

Who do you think this Deliverer is Who comes and banishes ungodliness from Jacob and takes away their sins? Who could that be other than Jesus Christ? Paul is saying, “God still has a plan to bring salvation to “all Israel” through Jesus Christ. It’s only through Jesus that they will come to salvation. It’s why Paul is so earnest about getting the gospel to his Jewish friends and kinsmen. They need to hear the gospel. It’s important for us to grasp this point, because ever since the holocaust, there have been people who have argued that it’s anti-Semitic to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with Jewish people and to say that Jewish people need to put their trust in Jesus as their Messiah in order to be saved. They say, “Don’t do that. That’s anti-Semitic.” Even some Bible-believing evangelicals sometimes get confused on this. Some suggest that God has two different covenants—one for the Gentiles and one for the Jews—and that somehow in the end God will save the Jewish people apart from faith in Christ as their Messiah.

But Paul is very clear that it’s only through Jesus. That’s why he’s preaching the gospel. He understands that *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among people by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). The only way for a Jewish person or for a Gentile person to be saved is through faith in Jesus Christ. Actually, if we love the Jewish people, we will share the gospel with them. It’s actually the most anti-Semitic thing to withhold the gospel from a Jewish person, not to share the way of salvation in Jesus. If we love the Jewish people as God does, we will do all we can to bring Jews to Jesus.

So when Paul talks about Israel, he’s talking about Jewish people. When he talks about salvation, he’s talking about true faith in Christ. What does he mean now by the word “all”—all Israel? This cannot mean every single Israelite who’s ever lived. We know that there are Jewish people in the Bible and in history who have died apart from faith in Christ. There’s not some type of after-death second chance that Paul has in view here. What I believe Paul is referring to is not even just the elect remnant of Israel being saved.

It seems to me that Paul is envisioning something that’s going to happen in history when a great mass of Jewish people will experience salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Not every single Jewish person, but Israel as a whole—in great numbers—will experience salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It’s kind of like we might say, “Geneva has the Festival of the Lights at

Christmastime and the whole town came out to see it.” We don’t mean that every single person in Geneva came to the Festival of Lights. Likewise, Paul doesn’t necessarily mean that every single Jewish person living at this point in time is going to experience salvation, but Israel as a whole. I think he has in mind here a massive number of Jewish people.

The last question we need to ask in this verse is, “When and how will this happen?” You might have your opinions about this. You might have studied this, so you realize there are a lot of different interpretations of how this might happen. I think we cannot be dogmatic about this. But many people think this will happen close to the time of the return of Jesus Christ. For instance, I heard Tom Schreiner give a very persuasive case for this, stating that when Jesus returns—or just prior to His return—He will reveal Himself to the Jewish people in such a way that what Zechariah prophesied in Zechariah 12:10 will be fulfilled. What did the prophet Zechariah say?

*And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.*

Zechariah is prophesying a day when the tears of repentance will flow. The sin of unbelief will taste bitter and the mercy of God will be sweet. Out of those tears of unbelief, Zechariah says in Zechariah 13:1, “*On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.*”

Some Christ followers believe that around the time of the return of Jesus, He’s going to reveal Himself through the gospel in such a way that many Jewish people are going to realize—like the apostle Paul realized on the Road to Damascus—“This Jesus is the One I’ve been persecuting.” They’re going to realize, “We have not believed in our Messiah.” They’re going to realize, “He was crucified for our sins” and they’re going to mourn over this. Out of that repentance is going to come faith in Jesus Christ and a cleansing that will be opened through His blood that He shed on the cross, then many Jewish people at that time are going to be saved.

I find myself very attracted to that interpretation. I think that is wonderful to think about—many, many Jewish people coming to faith in Christ around the time of His return. But I also agree with Tim Keller, who says, “Paul’s language allows for the possibility of a steady but growing flow of Jews into Christianity until we arrive at the place where more or most Jews have come to believe.” So it could be that through the working of the Spirit, there’s going to be a

steady flow of Jews coming to faith in Jesus throughout the time of history, and that flow is going to grow until we come to the point where more or most of the Jews have come to believe in Jesus.

However the Lord does this, however the Lord unfolds His merciful plan, it will be glorious. It will be wonderful to behold. It will be full of mercy. Look at what Paul said back in Romans 11:15: *“For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”* That sounds gloriously wonderful and exciting to me.

Why does this matter for us? We know that the whole nation of Israel is currently in the news a lot and there are a lot of political implications and things people want to talk about. That’s not what I’m here for today. I know that last week our President declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel and this week the Vice President is going to go before the Israeli Knesset giving a speech. I also know if you look on Facebook and read reports of our missionaries in neighboring Arab countries, there has been a lot of unrest as a result of these political developments.

Just as a reminder, Paul didn’t know anything about U.S. politics when he wrote these verses. He wasn’t concerned about those things. I’m not going to tell us what we should think about the politics and the foreign policy in these matters, partly because I’m not smart enough, but mainly because I’m a preacher of the gospel. What I know we should think is that God cares as much about the salvation of other nations as He does about the salvation of the Jewish people. So we care about what happens in Israel today, but we also care about what happens in Palestine and Jordan and Lebanon and Egypt and Turkey and Syria. It’s been so sweet to have Peter, a 95-year-old Syrian pastor, worshiping with us this month. We’re so grateful for the work of the gospel in all these nations.

The way we should care the most about Jewish people is not through our politics, but through prayer and evangelism, to make the gospel known to Jewish people—whether they live in Jerusalem or Skokie—because God’s grace comes only through faith in Jesus. There’s no way to be saved apart from Jesus. So we should be like the prodigal son saying to the elder brother, “Come on in to the party. You belong here.”

We should be sharing the gospel with the Jewish people, viewing them with humility and hope, remembering—as verse 28 says—that even if right now they are enemies of the gospel, we were too, until God opened our eyes to believe in Jesus. And remember, as verse 28 says, *“They are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.”* For the sake of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He has not abandoned the promises He made to their ancestors. As verse 29 says, *“The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”*

I think that’s a wonderful statement of a truth that should comfort all of us greatly. When God makes a promise to us, He makes it for keeps. When God gives gifts to us, He does not take

them back. When God gives you the Holy Spirit, He keeps that Holy Spirit in you. His mercies are new every morning; great is His faithfulness (Lamentations 3:23). His gifts and His calling are irrevocable. So be hopeful about what God is going to do among the Jews and what that will mean for the glory of His eternal Kingdom. And pray for the Jewish people. Pray for the return of the King, for Jesus to come and wrap up history in a glorious consummation.

### **The Vastness of God's Merciful Plan**

We are going to stand amazed at what He has accomplished in the end and we will stand amazed at the vastness of God's merciful plan. Let's look at that for a few minutes in verses 30-32. I don't know about you, but for me, Romans 9-11 has been daunting. These chapters are deep. There's lots of stuff in these chapters that can boggle our minds and some of it is hard to accept. A God Who elects people to salvation? A God Who, in His justice, hardens some, giving them over to the hardness that's already there in their disobedient hearts? We wrestle with these truths.

But whatever you conclude from these truths that are clearly revealed in Scripture, don't come to the conclusion that God has a hard heart or that God has a cold heart or that God is arbitrary or capricious in making decisions. He's not a mechanical god, robotically picking people like a lottery. He's a God of love, a God of mercy, a God Who delights in showing mercy. In fact, Martin Luther liked to call the work of hardening "the work of God's left hand." It's not what He delights in doing. The work of God's right hand is showing mercy. He delights to show mercy. He is patient and longsuffering and merciful.

He's so merciful that verses 30-31 recapitulate what we've been hearing throughout this chapter: that God is able to take the rejection of one group of people—the Jews—and use it as a catapult to thrust His mercy far more widely into the world. Then in His great mercy and wisdom and love, God is able to come back and show mercy afresh to the people who rejected Him in the first place. That's what verses 30-31 are describing. How vast is His mercy!

I love how Ray Ortlund paraphrases Romans 11:32. This is a great summary of what we've been hearing in this chapter:

What, then, have we learned of the ways of God? That God has so ordered history and our lives as to confine us all to a disobedience from which we could not escape, so that He could then bestow upon us all a mercy we could never deserve. His mercy triumphs over our disobedience.

What a beautiful description of the truth Paul has been laboring to get across through this whole chapter. “God has so ordered history and our lives as to confine us all to a disobedience from which we could not escape.” You’re a disobedient son, a disobedient daughter. I’m a disobedient child. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We can’t escape it. We can’t deny it. That all of humanity is sinful is one of the universally provable doctrines of Scripture. It’s so obvious. But He has confined us all to disobedience—why?

Verse 32 says, *“that he may have mercy on all.”* This is the heart of our God. He’s a God Who has mercy on all. This doesn’t mean that every single human being without exception will be saved. But it’s all of humanity without distinction—rich and poor, red and yellow, black and white, all nations—all peoples on the face of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

When we stand before the throne of the Lamb and worship Him Who sits on the throne with people from every tribe and language and nation—which the book of Revelation calls “an innumerable multitude” who number more than the grains of sand on the seashore—and when we see how vast God’s mercy has been upon humanity, we will be amazed. We will praise Him with unthrottled praise and worship with all nations. As the old hymn says, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea.”

The Puritan John Donne put it this way:

If we were to say God has no mercy for just a minute, God would cease to be God, because mercy is at the heart of His being.

If some king of the earth has so large an extent of dominion in north and south that he hath winter and summer together in his dominions, so large an extent east and west that he hath day and night together in his dominions, much more hath God mercy and judgment together.... All occasions invite His mercies and all times are His seasons. His mercy is vast and great.

There’s only one fitting response to the mystery and vastness of God’s merciful plan: “O come, let us adore Him.” Let us worship Him. Let us praise Him. It’s what Paul does at the end of Romans 11 in this great doxology. He’s brought us to the pinnacle of the highest peak of the universe. We look out over the vast panorama of history. We see the valleys of unbelief and darkness and sin lifted up by the mercy of God. We see the mountains of unbelief and rebellion and pride brought low. We see the glory of the Lord being revealed as His merciful plan unfolds and salvation comes to the nations and to the Jewish people.

We see Jesus, the rejected King of Israel, Who then rises again as the King of all nations. He ascends to the right hand of the majesty on high and all authority in heaven and on earth is

given to Him. He pours out His Spirit and His gospel goes forth to all the nations. The nations are being gathered under His merciful reign and rule. Then we see Jesus, the rejected King of Israel, continuing to gather the children of Israel into His Kingdom. And when He returns, His blood-bought bride is going to praise Him and worship Him and say, “Hallelujah, what a Savior is He—worthy of all praise.” We will never, ever get to the bottom of how He did all this. All we can do is stand amazed at the depth of His merciful plan.

### **The Depth of God’s Merciful Plan**

Do you see in verse 33 the depth of His plan? “*Oh,*” Paul says, “*the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*” I love to hear him say, “*Oh!*” No one has ever expounded the gospel as brilliantly as Paul has. No one has seen what the Apostle Paul has seen with his mind and with his heart. He is the apostle who brings us into the profundities like none other.

But he ends up saying here at the end of Romans 11, “There are infinities and immensities to God’s plan that are beyond my mind’s ability to grasp.” And we think we’re clever? Paul just falls on his face, saying, “*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge.*” We see Paul worshipping here and we join him in profound adoration. We realize we would never be able to reason our way to God. We can never think our way to God. It’s too deep. His riches and wisdom and knowledge are beyond our mind’s ability to grasp. Verse 33: “*How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*”

His plans, His decisions, the way He executes His plans—we can’t fathom that. We couldn’t investigate them enough. There’s no amount of examination that could bring us to a full understanding of this. We could study the rest of our lives and never get to the bottom of the gospel. His ways are past finding out. His pathways no man can trace. He doesn’t need our advice or our counsel on carrying out His plan. Verse 34: “*Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?*”

Just look at the way He sent His Son into the world. Who would have ever conceived a salvation like this? We would have sent His Son into a palace, but God sent Him into a manger. We would have given Him wealth and popularity, but God gave Him poverty and obscurity. We would have made Him a great philosopher, but God made Him a carpenter—one of us. We would have had Him conquer through power, but God had Him suffer in weakness and triumph through death on a cross. There’s nothing we can do to repay Him for all He’s done for us. Verse 35: “*Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?*”

All we can do is worship this God Who knows all things, this God Who plans it all with infinite wisdom, Who knows why everything works the way it does. All we can do is worship this

God Whom we can't explain, this God we can't counsel, this God we could never accuse of unfairness, because He carries it all out in perfect justice and wisdom. We worship Him Who is the source of all things, the sustainer of all things, the goal of all things, because "*from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever.*"

Let's join our voices in giving praise to our great God for His plan.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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