

Romans: The Good News of God

Is Israel's Rejection Total?

Romans 11:1-10

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Is Israel's Rejection Total?

Scripture

Today we continue our study in Romans 11. Let's read Romans 11:1-10:

¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ³"Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." ⁴But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." ⁵So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

⁷What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸as it is written,

**"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day."**

⁹And David says,

**"Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block
and a retribution for them;
¹⁰let their eyes be darkened
so that they cannot see,
and bend their backs forever." (Romans
11:1-10)**

Introduction

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul makes the point that righteousness is the gift of God through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. A perceptive reader of the first 8 chapters of Romans would notice that Israel—God's elect nation—seems to be missing from the blessings of salvation.

So Paul set out to make three points in Romans 9-11. First, in Romans 9 Paul talks about salvation from the divine side. Salvation is a matter of the divine sovereign election of some and the passing by of others. God is sovereign, and he chooses whom he wills for salvation.

Second, in Romans 10 Paul talks about salvation from the human side. Israel's failure to receive salvation was caused by her ignorance and works-righteousness (cf. 9:31-33; 10:3, 21).

And third, in Romans 11:1-10 Paul makes the point that, in spite of Israel's obvious failure, her failure is not *total*. Moreover, in the last section of Romans 11 Paul makes the point that Israel's failure is not *final*. In fact, there is a time coming when all Israel shall be saved (11:26).

Lesson

With that we turn to the text of Romans 11 and the subject, "Is Israel's Rejection Total?"

I. The Pauline Question (11:1a)

Paul asks in verse 1: **"I ask, then, has God rejected his people?"**

It is a natural question in light of the last words of Romans 10. There Paul speaks most strongly of the unfaithfulness of Israel. He wrote in Romans 10:21, "But of Israel he [i.e., God] says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'" In light of their present condition, what more natural

question is there than this one, **“Has God rejected his people?”**

But, by the way Paul asks the question he anticipates a particular answer. In the first place, in the Greek text he uses a negative particle in his question that is used when the questioner expects a negative answer to his question. In other words, the question may be put in this way, “God did not reject his people, has he?” That would be true to the Greek grammar.

Further, the very use of the expression **“his people”** lets the perceptive reader know what kind of a reply the apostle expects. When God takes a people to himself, it is forever.

And, in addition, in more than one place in the Old Testament the explicit statement is made that God will not reject **his people**. For example, Psalm 94:14 says, “For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage.” And 1 Samuel 12:22 says, “For the Lord will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself.”

II. The Pauline Answer (11:1b-6)

Now, let’s look at the Pauline answer.

A. Direct Denial (11:1b)

Paul directly denies God’s rejection of his people. **“By no means!”** (11:1b) is his emphatic reply to his own question.

If God were to forsake his people, then he would become a liar, and a covenant breaker. How could we possibly justify that in the light of his character as one who is absolutely honest and true?

B. The Case of Paul (11:1c-2a)

Paul further explains why God has not rejected his people. He says, **“For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin”** (11:1c).

God has not rejected his people, simply because Paul is himself a saved Israelite. His own salvation proves God's faithfulness to his covenant promise.

He might have introduced others also, such as Simeon and Anna (cf. Luke 2:25, 38). They, too, were Israelites, and they had not been forgotten by a faithful God. By grace alone through faith in Christ alone they had also been saved by God.

Paul refers to himself as **“an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”** As commentator Matthew Black says, “The Benjamites were the Israelite ‘aristocracy.’” When the defection of the ten tribes took place after the death of Solomon, Benjamin stayed by the side of Judah in the south. They did not follow the ten tribes in the setting up of the schismatic altars, the alien priesthood, and the temples at Bethel and Gilgal. God had pronounced a curse on anyone who offered a sacrifice for sin anywhere in the world except at the door of the tabernacle of the Lord (cf. Leviticus 17:1-9). Paul claimed membership in the faithful **tribe of Benjamin**, the smallest of the tribes (cf. 1 Samuel 9:21).

But, as commentator Luthi suggests, someone might say of Paul's salvation, “One swallow does not make a summer.”

So, Paul states positively what he is affirming in verse 2a. He writes, **“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.”** The word **“foreknew”** means “to choose in love.” What Paul is saying is this: “God, in love, has chosen his people, and he has not rejected them.”

In other words, God is not fickle. He has, as my old Seminary professor S. Lewis Johnson says, “a plan within a plan. He intends to bring Israel to her promises, but the way includes the present time of Gentile blessing also (cf. vv. 11-15).”

C. The Parallel with Elijah (11:2b-6)

Paul now introduces Elijah as an illustration in verse 2b-6: **“Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he**

appeals to God against Israel? ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.’ But what is God’s reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”

Elijah was the great prophet of Israel in the days of her back-sliding. At that time apostasy was widespread, but it was not universal (1 Kings 19:10-18), which frankly is also the case today. Elijah thought that he alone had remained faithful to the Lord, but God had to remind him most vividly that he had reserved to himself 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to the image of Baal.

In verse 5 Paul indicates that the presence of the remnant proves God does not cast away his people. The words **“so too”** draw the comparison between Elijah’s day and Paul’s day.

The **“remnant”** refers to the Jewish converts in Paul’s day, that is, Jewish believers in the church, which was by now becoming largely Gentile in character.

The reference to **grace** launches the apostle into an explanation of salvation by grace and not by works: **“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”**

James S. Stewart, in one of his books has commented in some detail on the principal marks of legalism. Three things characterize legalism. First, there is redemption by human effort, man wishing to build his own highway to heaven by his “good” deeds.

Second, there is its mercenary spirit, seen in man’s desire to stand before God and to point to his own piled-up moral achievements, saying, “There is what I’ve done: now give me my reward.” That mercenary attitude is always developed by the legalistic spirit, which always is multiplying its claims upon God through the regulations it proposes to obey.

And, finally, there is its fondness for negatives, its “thou shalt nots,” so destructive of the freedom of grace.

God's grace, however, is free, the product of the sovereign love of our mighty Triune God. Augustine once said, "Gratia, nisi gratis sit, non est gratia," which may be translated, "Grace, unless it should be free, is not grace." Grace is not to be procured by works.

There are those who say that Paul is unintelligible, but in reality he is understandable, providing we come to him out of a need of forgiveness and a despair of finding it in our own human efforts.

Commentator Denney has some important words to say on this matter:

To say that Paul is unintelligible, or that he presents Christianity in a way which does it every kind of injustice and is finally unacceptable to us, is to fly in the face of history and experience. There have always been people who found Paul intelligible and accepted the gospel as he preached it. There are such people still, if not in theological classrooms, then in mission halls, at street corners, in lonely rooms. It is not historical scholarship that is wanted for the understanding of him, and neither is it the insight of genius; it is despair. Paul did not preach for scholars, nor even for philosophers; he preached for sinners. He had no gospel except for men whose mouths were stopped, and who were standing condemned at the bar of God. They understood him, and they find him eminently intelligible still. When a man has the simplicity to say, with Dr. Chalmers, "What could I do if God did not justify the ungodly?" he has the key to the Pauline gospel of reconciliation in his hand.

III. The Logical Conclusion (11:7-10)

What is the logical conclusion of all that Paul is saying? The logical conclusion of his line of reasoning is in verses 7-10.

A. The Boon of Election (11:7)

Paul says in verse 7: **"What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened."**

Viewed from the human side, Israel has failed to obtain righteousness (7a-c), but the elect have obtained it (7d). Thus, God has not rejected his people.

Viewed from the divine side, however, something else must be said, and Paul says it. **“The rest were hardened”** is his comment. The word **hardened** is very strong, referring to the hardening of a callous. It is used metaphorically here, but the force is that of a deep hardening (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:14).

Paul tells us in verse 8 that God is the agent who performs the hardening: **“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day”** (11:8).

Paul, as usual, points to election as the basis of acceptance, and sin as the basis of judgment (not non-election). There is no arbitrariness, or evidence that God prevents a seeking soul from knowing him. Nor is there injustice, for none deserve anything. The truth expressed by Paul may be traced to our Lord himself (cf. Mark 4:12; John 12:40).

B. The Blindness of the Rest (11:8-10)

Paul, in customary fashion, clinches his argument and conclusion by quoting Scripture, in this case portions from the Law (cf. Deuteronomy 29:4), the Prophets (Isaiah 29:10), and the Writings (cf. Psalm 69:22-23). He says in verses 8-10: **“As it is written, ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.’ And David says, ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.’”**

The people of Israel in Paul’s day were hardened and blind like Israel in the wilderness, dazed and obtuse like the Israel of Isaiah’s day.

Further, David’s persecutors were the forerunners of our Lord’s Israel, guilty of deicide and falling under judicial hardening

and blindness, which was their recompense.

There are many truths that find illustration here. A person is free to accept or reject the gospel but, if he rejects it, he still sustains a relation to the Savior. The influence of the rejection abides in his hardening. Just as the smallest particle of light falling on unexposed film produces a chemical change that can never be undone, so the rejection of Christ leaves a permanent mark on a person's soul.

People do not merely neglect the gospel when it is heard. There is always a response. If there is rejection, the person is worse off, after having heard the message. "And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces," Jesus said (cf. Matthew 21:44). And it is true.

All the heretics of the ages know the truth now. Just as the King of Babylon was greeted in Hades by the inhabitants there with the words, "You too have become as weak as we! You have become like us!" (Isaiah 14:10), so have all the heretics of the past been greeted at their deaths.

Conclusion

Oh! The danger of becoming "gospel-hardened"!

"Let their own table before them become a snare" (Psalm 69:22), David said of the unbelieving Israelites of his day, who nevertheless were still offering the sacrifices.

That may happen in our evangelical churches. Our services and our observances of the sacraments may become a snare to us, if we are not exercised by them, giving them the attention of our hearts.

It was said of those around the cross, "Sitting down they watched him there" (Matthew 27:36, *KJV*). In a sense the watch continues as Christ is preached.

The four soldiers indifferently cast lots for his garment.

The Sadducees and Pharisees, the intellectual and the religious, blasphemed him.

Romans: The Good News of God

The women and the crowds sincerely pitied him, but did not really understand.

Only the dying thief was touched by the despair of his lost condition, crying out, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.”

Even the saints fled out of fear and anxiety.

What is your attitude? May God move all of us to cry out with the thief in the despair of self-salvation, “‘Lord, remember me’ in grace and save me by your sacrifice!” Amen.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Taken from Ray Ortland's *A Passion for God*:

O Lord, how clever and persistent we are in our attempts to intrude ourselves into the equation of grace. We would even argue that it was something in us that you foresaw which prompted you to choose us. We would argue that our faith, our repentance, our yearning for you, as possible grounds for your choice of us. But now we repudiate it all. Why did we, hardened rebels, surrender our swords to you, our rightful King? How did we, lost wanderers, find our way to your doorstep? Did we reason our way into your grace? Did we believe our way there? Did we lift ourselves, fatally maimed, into your arms, our Great Physician? No. It was your grace, your choice. You alone framed the gracious plan according to which we have become yours. You chose us for yourself, and now you are preserving us for yourself. We yield fully to you, omnipotent Savior. Only keep us faithful to yourself amid the filthy idols of this present evil age. O God, preserve us from sin. Lead us in the paths of righteousness, for your name's sake, all the way home.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.