

# A Remnant of God's People

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*Romans*

By Pastor Edward Donnelly

**Bible Text:** Romans 11:1-36  
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We turn in the word of God together to the book of Romans. Romans chapter 11, found on page 1,140 of the Church Bibles. 1,140, Romans 11. We read the whole chapter together. This is the word of God.

1 I 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. 2 God 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." 4 But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5 So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. 7 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, 8 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." 9 And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; 10 let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever." 11 So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. 12 Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! 13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry 14 in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. 15 For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? 16 If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were

grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. 19 Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. 23 And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. 25 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. 26 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"; 27 "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." 28 As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. 29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. 32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. 33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

So reads God's word. We turn in God's word as we continue our study of Paul's letter to the Romans to chapter 11. I'm going to do something quite unusual this morning. It's really because I want to reach the end of this book, preaching through it, before I retire. So I'm going to cover chapter 11 in one sermon. Now that is really an impossible task. If I wanted to explain the whole of this chapter of 36 verses, we'd probably be here until four or five o'clock this afternoon. So I want to take for one week a somewhat unusual approach. It's not really preaching through the sermon. It's something I trust that will be of some help to help us to understand to a certain extent, but also of help to use the Scripture to a large extent.

We're dealing in chapters 9 to 11 with the problem of the nation of Israel, the people of Israel, rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ. In chapter 9, Paul has shown us that God is in control of all things. "Don't panic," he says, "this is all part of God's doing." In chapter

10, he's shown us that human beings are responsible to God and spelt that out in various ways. But as yet, he hasn't faced the basic issue. He hasn't provided us with a satisfactory answer to the chief question and he refers to that in verse 1, "I ask, then, has God rejected his people?" That's the basic issue. That's the problem. Has God rejected the people whom he has loved and worked for for approximately 2,000 years? All God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament, are they going to be fulfilled or are they going to be forgotten? Is their apostasy, is their rejection final and absolute? Is that it, Israel are away, they're away from God, they've forgotten him, and that's the end? These are questions of great practical importance for the very reliability of the Old Testament, of God's word, even for us. Is it making sense? Is it saying what is true and what will happen? And I want to approach the chapter today from three different angles. First of all, a positive explanation. Secondly, a problematic interpretation. And thirdly, and this is I suppose most important, a practical application.

So I want us to begin briefly with what I've called a positive explanation. Paul looks at the apparent tragedy. The people of God has rejected God, they've rejected God, they've turned away from him. It's a tragedy. And in this chapter, he turns it round into something glowing with real hope. It's not a tragedy, he says, it's a glory. He pours a flood of light into a dark place and he gives an explanation in the first two stages of the chapter, and that's all we'll look at in this section. Firstly then, in verses 1 to 10, he says that Israel's rejection, even now, is partial. It's not complete. Not all Israel has rejected. Not all Israel has turned away. Not all Israel has refused their God and their Savior. He asked the question in verse 1, has God rejected his people, all his people, every one of them, without exception? Is that what has happened? He says, "By no means! For I myself am an Israelite." I myself, I'm an Israelite. God has not rejected all his people. He writes to these people in this church, many of them are non-Jews. He says, "I'm a Jew." God has in Israel, a remnant, a chosen remnant, an elect remnant. In that nation, there are people who are his. Not everyone in the nation, but there are people who are his, and that has always been God's practice. He quotes the time of Elijah, many centuries earlier when most of the nation had turned away from God, but not everyone had turned away from God. There were people who hadn't, who trusted God, the real Israel, the true Israel. He says in verse 5 of the nation, in his day, in their day, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace. Don't say that the Israelites have all abandoned God. Don't say that they're all lost, that they're all destructive. There are many in that nation who are God's people, who trust him and obey him and worship and serve him and they're chosen by God's grace, inevitably saved. Israel's rejection is partial. It's not complete. Not all Israel has been cast out.

Now the rest of Israel is hardened as prophesied in the Old Testament, verse 8, "'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.'" That's what always happened in Israel. Always happened. Adam and Eve's first two sons, C and A. What are their names? I can't remember them. I can remember the opening. Cain and Abel. Why, friends, why my brain does this? I have no idea. I don't know why I can remember the first letters of people's names, but I can't remember the next three letters. I don't understand it. Cain and Abel. Right at the beginning, there was one who didn't love God, who didn't trust God, who didn't serve

God, and that's been the pattern of Israel, the nation of Israel, right from then on throughout all history. But he says to these new Gentile Christians, "The rejection of Israel is no more complete in our day than it is in Elijah's day. Never think that all Israel is gone, that all Israel is lost, that there are none left. The present situation is not unique. It has happened before. It has happened always."

That's his first argument in verses 1 to 10 and then in verses 11 to 24, he makes a second. Israel's rejection, he says, is purposeful and temporary. Purposeful and temporary. God's dealing with the remnant is satisfactory. He redeems them. He saves them. But what happens to the mass of Israel? They turn away. They don't believe. They are lost. But look what Paul says in verse 11, "I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall?" He means by they, all Israel. All Israel. That Israel might fall forever. Is that what's going to happen? And in these verses he says, no, their rejection is temporary. It's not final. And here's the point, it has a vital part to play in divine purpose for the world. Because of the Jewish rejection, many Gentiles hear the gospel and they're converted as a result. Verse 11, talking about the Jews, "through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles." Through their trespass, salvation has come to the Gentiles. There's a loving purpose in it. Verse 12, "their trespass means riches for the world." Riches for the world. Verse 13, "I am an apostle to the Gentiles." Verse 15, "their rejection means the reconciliation of the world."

Now I don't think he's writing these words with a smile. I think he's writing them with tears in his eyes and the grief in his heart about so many of his own people and his own race. But nonetheless, he's saying God is bringing mercy for the world from what happened to Israel. Their rejection means Gentile reconciliation. But how does this relate to our question? In this way, says Paul, and here's the wonderful thing, here's the thing I think that many Gentile Christians forget today, he's saying that part of the purpose of Gentile conversions is to provoke Israel to jealousy and to bring them to salvation. Gentiles are converted because Israel, Israel's people have turned away from Christ and because the Gentiles are converted that will lead many of the Israelites, many of the Jews to trust in Christ. Verse 11, "salvation has come to Gentiles so as to make Israel jealous," to stir them up spiritually. More clearly in verses 13 and 14, "I magnify my ministry," ministry to the Gentiles. "I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them." Do you see the way it works? The Jews reject. The Gentiles are preached to. Many of them believe and that stirs and leads many of the Jews then to believe. Paul's intense labors for the Gentiles, far from being an abandonment of his own people, is for the indirect purpose of bringing many of them to Christ.

In verse 12 he speaks of their full inclusion. Verse 15, their acceptance. And verses 30 and 31 are wonderfully helpful. He writes to the Gentiles, listen to this, writing to the Gentiles, "just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy." Do you see the pattern, the way it works? That's a sketchy view I know, but in the main I've been trying to give you a straightforward explanation of what Paul is saying here, his positive explanation. But that

leads us to his problematic interpretation. I'd ask you to look at verses 24 and 25. This is one of the great battlegrounds of the New Testament, two verses over which hundreds of men have argued for hundreds of years. "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers, a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in and in this way, all Israel will be saved." What do these words mean? What do these words mean? And I tell you now that I'm not going to tell you what they mean because I'm not sure what they mean but I hope I can leave you with some satisfaction.

A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved." This is the mystery. What does it mean? There are two main suggestions. The first is that Paul is here referring to the future, to the future which hasn't come yet but will come towards the end of the world, a time when Israel as a nation will be converted after the fullness of the Gentiles has been gathered in. When the Gentiles have been converted, a wonderful day will arise when God will pour his Spirit upon the land of Israel and the people of Israel and convert most of that nation. That's one understanding. The second understanding is that it refers to the past, the present, and the future. Paul is saying here that throughout the whole period of history, Jews will be converted along with Gentiles. There will always be some Jews converted throughout the world. It will always happen. It will always continue, he says, so that in this way, all Israel will be saved. He means by that all elect Israel, all God's Israel, either all the elect Jews or all the elect people, Jews and Gentiles. So those are the two main sensible interpretations of these verses and, of course, they don't agree with each other. One, that God in the future will redeem most of the people living in the land of Israel, most of the Israelites perhaps in the world. And the second is that throughout history, both Israelites and Jews and Gentiles are converted and in this way, all Israel is saved.

Now, which is the answer? As I said, you won't find the right answer for me because of two reasons, two reasons why I won't give you the answer. The first reason, the important reason, is I'm not sure. I'm not sure which of these is the right answer. There are not many things in the New Testament, and I look at them and say, I'm not sure. But friends, this is one. I can't tell lies. I can't pretend a pride that I don't have. The great preachers and the wonderful commentators argue on various sides and I may tell you, I have consulted very many commentators. Who believes in the first view, national Israel, the day is coming when a national Israel will be converted? Charles Hodge, J. G. Vos, John Murray, Martyn Lloyd Jones, James Philip. All these are men we honor and we respect and those of us who are ministers, read. They all believe that this passage is speaking of a future conversion of the nation of Israel. Who believed the other view? It can divide into two. Who believes that what he's talking about here is the conversion of elect Jews throughout history? Elect Jews throughout history, that is the view, the great view of the mighty Dutch theologians, Bavinck, Berkhof, Hendrickson, Ritterbush. They say these verses are telling us that throughout history, from the beginning to the end, the elect Jews are being converted. Who believes that it's a spiritual Israel, Jews and Gentiles together? Not so many that we would follow, but John Calvin believes it. He teaches it firmly. And a modern writer, Stuart Olyott, who has written many things in a good commentary, a simple commentary on Romans, he believes that, and many moderns. And the arguments

are very finely balanced. I've read a lot of them. I've read a lot of them. It's hard to decide. J. G. Vos writes, "This is a very difficult passage. Those who claim that it is simple and its meaning obvious only betray their ignorance of the problems involved and the literature which has been written on the subject."

And so, friends, I don't want to abuse the authority of this pulpit today for more than a preference. I have a preference. Don't ask me what it is because I'm not going to tell you. I might be wrong. I might be wrong. And I could just say to you, thank God, in nearly 37 years, have you ever heard me saying this before from the pulpit? There are not many things that the preacher isn't sure about but if he is not sure about, he shouldn't pretend he is. He shouldn't pretend he is. And that brings us to the second reason, which is this: it doesn't really matter. It doesn't really matter. I'm not downgrading the Scripture and thinking of the Apostle Peter. He writes in 2 Peter 3:16 of his dear brother, Paul, his letters, there are some things in them that are hard to understand. Here's Peter the great apostle, he says some things that Paul writes, I'm not sure what he means, I'm not sure what he's saying, I'm not sure what will happen. And what I would say is that who holds these two different views, we are all agreed on the important things and that's the point. That's the point. We're all agreed perfectly and completely on important things. We're all agreed, for example, that the gospel needs to be preached to all people, that the Jews cannot be saved without the gospel. We're all agreed that many from both kinds of people will believe, and many Jews will believe, and many Gentiles will believe. And we're all agreed that there are no distinctions made among God's people, either before faith or after faith. God doesn't say to the Jews, "I'll deal with you in a different way. I'll save you in a different way." It's the same way. It's the same way. And after they're converted, we all have to live the same way, believe the same way, obey the same way, serve God the same way, worship the same way. There's no difference.

So friends, let's not magnify the difficulty. Let's not allow the difficulty to trouble us and bother us. I think it is quite hard to make a definitive, definite decision on this, but such discussion about this, I think, could do harm instead of good. The clear things, the basic things are clear and unquestionable to us all and the day will come when we will all know the answer. We will all know the truth, and that brings me thirdly this morning to what I've called our practical applications. Our practical applications. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." That's the purpose of this passage. That's the ultimate purpose of this passage, that it will equip us for every good work, that it has practical, personal value. Not that we spend our life arguing with each other about the minor difficult details, but that we're helped, that we're blessed, that we're improved, and that we grow as Christians and this is chiefly why Paul wrote it.

And I want briefly to mention four points. How does this passage, with all its difficulties, how does it benefit us, bring application? First of all, I would say encouragement. Encouragement. There's no doubt about it that the Christians of Paul's day were staggered at the defection of the Jews, at the losing of the Jews. For centuries they had known the Jews as God's people and now the Christians were saying they're not God's people.

They're not God's people. They've rejected God. They've turned away from God. Paul chooses the example of Elijah deliberately. In verse 3, poor Elijah, a lonely, faithful man, says to God, "I alone am left." I alone am left. God says, "No, you're not. You're not alone." Verse 4, God says to him, "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal. You didn't know they existed. You didn't know, Elijah, that there were all these believers faithful to me. Far, far more people faithful to me than you realized." And I think, my dear friends, that there are times when God says that to us. There are far more Christians than you realize. There are far more believers than you realize. There are many good churches and they're full of believers. But friends, it's more than that. We can feel discouraged, I can feel discouraged as we look at the huge denominations and their pathetic teaching and their examples and all the mistakes they make and the attitudes they have and there's little evidence of saving faith. It just looks hopeless but I think we need to remember that even in those churches there's a remnant of God's people. They may be mixed up, their theology may be all over the place, but in some and many of those big churches there are men and women who have been saved by God's power.

Now perhaps they don't show it as they should, perhaps they don't live it out all the way that they should, but God says here in verse 5, Paul says, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." There are more Christians in this land than we imagine and we'll be surprised in heaven. There will be also other people who think they're Christians. We may think they're Christians. We'll find they're not. But both are true. Encouragement. Secondly, humbling. Humbling. Some of the Gentile believers at this time were tending to boast themselves about their salvation and to look down on the Jewish people, the unbelievers who'd thrown it all away. The Gentiles, "We're the important ones. The Jews are pathetic sinners. God has chosen us and God has rejected them." Paul reminds them that they are no more than wild olive branches grafted into a parent tree. Verses 17 and 18, "if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others, do not be arrogant toward the branches." Do not be arrogant towards the branches. You weren't great. You weren't perfect. You weren't sinless. You weren't unwicked. God had mercy on you. No reason to point the finger at the non-Christian and to sneer. God chose you. God loved you. God had mercy, and that's the reason. He says in verse 20, "do not become proud, but stand in awe." We are sinners saved by grace. Don't look down on the world. Don't look down. Oppose them if we have to, but don't look down on the world. God chose to save us. The credit is his. The glory is his. Humbling.

Thirdly, warning. Warning. The fall of Israel is a dreadful example, a dreadful example of history. They had so many privileges, God had done so much for them, delivering them from Egypt, giving them the commandments, bringing them to a promised land, blessing them and guiding them and directing them and preserving them and doing all this for his people, and they rejected him and they turned away from him, and it was terrible. But Paul says in verse 21, "if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you." The Jews had religious privileges, but they reached a stage where they didn't believe, and they were cast out. And we have religious privileges, and apart from God's grace, the time could come when we wouldn't believe, or our children or our

grandchildren wouldn't believe. The Reformed Presbyterian Church isn't guaranteed for the rest of history. It depends on our faith, our commitment, our obedience. He says in verse 20, "So do not become proud, but stand in awe." When you see what happened to the Jews and what happened to you, don't become proud. Don't become proud. That's nothing to do with it. Stand in awe.

And then lastly, worship. I wish we had time to look at the wonderful verses 33 to 36. Paul has moved past the academic debate, and now he's beside himself with praise as he thinks of the complexity of God's great plan. As we think of God's salvation, he says to us, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For from him and through him and to him are all things." It's a wonderful, wonderful God. We can't understand everything. We can't explain everything or defend everything, but we can look at our God, we can know that all is his, that he's wise, perfect, loving, that all that he does is holy and well and delightful.

Friends, there's lots of things about this issue that I brought before you this morning. I'm sure that we don't have answers, you don't understand and I don't understand, but we should leave here this morning, not as thinkers so much as glad worshipers, and to simply say what the chapter says at the end, "To him be glory forever. Amen."

*O God our Father, we are men and women with little minds, small understanding. We thank you for your word. We thank you for how it draws our eyes and minds to you, the holy, loving, almighty God, to your wise purposes throughout history, love for Jew and Gentile, using the salvation of one to be an example to another, the denial of one to be an encouragement to another. Father, help us to understand the chapter better, but help us, we pray, to live it out, to worship you, to love you, to thank you, to seek to live before you, trusting you for all our salvation in Christ. We ask it for his name's sake. Amen.*