

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part twenty-eight

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CAN GOD BE TRUSTED TO KEEP HIS WORD, OR HAS HE REJECTED HIS PEOPLE?

Romans 11:1-10 - "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.'"

The question with which Paul leads off this section is understandable considering his closing words of **chapter 10** - "But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people" (29). What then is to become of this rebellious people?

That's the issue. And even the **wording** of the first verse of chapter eleven shows the link with chapter ten - "***I ask, then, ["then" - in view of all I have just said] has God rejected his people?***" That word, "***then,***" shows Paul is relating this question back to something already said. Because Israel has been consistently, repeatedly rebellious to God's electing purpose for them, what is to become of them?

In a nutshell, "***has God - in view of Israel's unfaithfulness - totally rejected His people?***"(11:1). And the reason this is no small issue is God **promised** that He would **never** reject His people - **Psalm 94:14** - "For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage...."

So Paul's thinking in this eleventh chapter is **burdened** thinking. He sees and writes about Israel's willful blindness and rejection of God in Jesus Christ, God the Son, the Jewish Messiah and the Redeemer of the whole human race. He has just told us it wasn't that they didn't **hear** the truth and it wasn't that they didn't **understand** the truth (10:18-19). No, they **rejected** the divine Savior Son and the Father God who sent Him.

So the bottom-line question, the real issue is **where do the Jews stand?** Two issues stand out. Are they cast aside **totally** and are they cast aside **permanently?** Those are the two questions Paul sets himself to answer in this eleventh chapter. He will deal with the **first** question in our text today - **Are the Jews totally rejected by God, or partially?**

A general outline of our text would go something like this. The point Paul will make is the nature of God's rejection of the Jews is **partial**, not **complete**. And he will make that point in two ways (1-6). Then, after this point, Paul will describe the **nature** of the hardening work of God on Israel's hearts for their stubbornness in unbelief (7-10).

1) **GOD HAD NOT REJECTED THE JEWISH PEOPLE ENTIRELY, BECAUSE PAUL HIMSELF WAS A JEW AND HAD BEEN REACHED BY GOSPEL GRACE**

Romans 11:1 - "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."

That these autobiographical words from Paul are not just some kind of introduction should be obvious from their location in the whole letter. Paul is already more than half-way through his communication with these people and would have no reason to introduce himself at this late point. His words about himself are designed to fit his **purpose** in today's text. They complete an argument he is making.

If ever there was a Jew who was rejecting God's grace in Christ Jesus it was Paul. He was **persecuting** any and all who would dare to embrace Jesus Christ as the Messiah. So Paul **knew** what rejecting God's grace and plan was all about. But finally Paul quit his fight. Quite literally, he saw the light. Finally he gave admittance to the truth. Finally he swallowed his pride in Jewish ancestry and law-righteousness. And God was faithful to forgive and commission him.

So had God abandoned the Jews **totally?** Were they beyond hope if they turned in repentance and embraced the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promise and plan? Were they completely beyond reach? Paul points to himself

as proof that such was not the case. God had been merciful to this Pharisee, stubbornly basking in the false security of his ethnic Jewishness. God had redeemed and fulfilled untold purpose in Paul's life. So, no, God had not totally cast off the Jewish people.

2) **GOD HAD NOT REJECTED THE JEWS ENTIRELY BECAUSE THERE WAS STILL A FAITHFUL REMNANT OF BELIEVING JEWS IN PAUL'S DAY**

Romans 11:2-5 - "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."

The simple point Paul makes is that Elijah had overestimated Israel's apostasy. Certainly what Elijah said was true. Elijah knew that Israel *had* indeed repeatedly killed the very messengers sent to bring her the truth. Jesus accused Israel of the very same crimes. But where Elijah was *wrong* was in his assumption that *he* was the only loyalist left and that *everyone* else in Israel had abandoned God.

The situation, while bleak indeed, wasn't that hopeless. God had kept a remnant in Israel faithful to Himself - 7000, in fact, were still of the same heart and mind as Elijah toward God. And then Paul specifically says the same was true in his own day - "**So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace**"(11:5).

And we know this was the truth. We know because the Apostle James *told* Paul this was the case in **Acts 21:20** - "**And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him [to Paul], 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed....'**"

Thousands of Jews, just as in Elijah's day of self-pity, were believers in God's mercy and grace and faithfulness. True, these early Jewish Christians carried more than their share of issues to be worked through regarding the relationship between their new faith and their Jewish upbringing. But there were, none the less, thousands of Jews who weren't void of genuine devotion and humble faith in God's promise and mercy in Christ Jesus.

So, *no*, God had not *totally* rejected His people. Divine judgment ran *deep* to be sure, as we'll see in a minute, but even while the *majority* of the Jews had been set aside from God's grace, God's judgment was still *partial*, not *total*.

3) **PAUL AGAIN OUTLINES THE PATHWAY BY WHICH ALL PEOPLE - JEWS INCLUDED - MUST COME TO GOD'S LOVE AND GRACE**

Romans 11:5-6 - "**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.**"

The remnant in Israel stands by grace rather than works. God works through promise given and received by Abraham in *faith*, not by ethnic Judaism. So the remnant in Israel is a remnant of *faith*, called and sustained solely by God's grace.

God's *purpose* in the faithful remnant is to constantly display His salvation people as a people reached by His grace rather than their works. Right from first pronouncement of covenant with Abraham God made it clear Israel's role was to display the greatness of God's grace to the whole world. This plan had never changed. And because God is so anxious to display such marvelous grace to the whole world, He is faithful to sustain a remnant of grace among the Jewish people to this day.

Here again, Paul can't leave this important subject alone. If the Jewish remnant *deserved* their special place, then the whole witness to divine grace is shattered. One ounce of *merit* totally destroys *grace* - "**But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace**"(11:6).

Now we come to a very important transition point in today's text. There is a *reason* Paul restates his central proposition about grace and works right at this point. Because just as surely as grace is a wonderful thing to *accept*, it is a terrible thing to *reject*. And Paul now goes on to explain what has happened to the majority of Jews in his day and ours.

4) **JUST BECAUSE GRACE IS OFFERED FREELY DOESN'T MEAN IT CAN BE REJECTED WITHOUT**

CONSEQUENCE

It might be tempting to think of grace as any other gift in nature. Someone offers you something for free. You turn it down. No harm is done. It happens all the time in the give and take of life. But such, Paul will argue, is *not* the case when the gift is **God's** grace:

Romans 11:7-10 - "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.'"

That "*Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking*" (7a), is not a new idea for Paul - **Romans 9:32-32, 10:2-3** - "...Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. [32] Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone....10:2-3....I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. [3] For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."

Paul is very clear. Israel wasn't guilty of ignoring **God**. Like many in our world, she was religiously enamored with God. But for all her talk of devotion to **God** she was guilty of refusing His **grace**. And in refusing God's unfolding revelation of grace, consummated and completed in Christ Jesus, come in the flesh, she not only rejected God's grace, she candidated for His divine judgment.

To make this clear from their own Scriptures Paul sites two passages - one from Deuteronomy and one from the Psalms. The **Deuteronomy 29:14** text is used by Paul to demonstrate the principle of divine judgment for grace shunned. The quote from **Psalms 69** is used to show how the demarcation between those who trust in grace (the **remnant**) and those who do not is manifested in Israel to this day.

Romans 11:7 - "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened...."

These are striking words. They prove we need to be very careful when we talk about the "*elect*" in the letter to the Romans. It is used in different ways at different times. **All** Israel was elect in a certain sense. **All** Israel was "*chosen*" to be the recipients of many cherished blessings.

Paul has already outlined the **general blessings** to the nation of Israel in **Romans 9:4-5** - "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. [5] To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen." Such was God's marvelous grace to **all** Israel.

But Paul used the term "*elect*" very differently in **11:7**. In fact, he uses it to **separate** the elect **from** the rest of Israel - **Romans 11:7** - "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened...." So, there is the "*elect*," and then there is the "*rest*" of Israel.

So yes, as we've already quoted from **Psalms 94:14**, God would **never** forsake His people - "**For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage....**" In other words, in the elect - the faithful remnant - God **was** faithful to His covenant promise to Abraham. He has, says Paul, **always** maintained a faithful remnant - a witness to His covenant of faith - among Israel. But now Paul goes on to describe **another** aspect of God's work among Israel. And it's a frightful one indeed:

Romans 11:7 - "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, **but the rest were hardened....**"

And, to make his point clear, it's at this point Paul makes use of his two Old Testament quotes. First, Paul quotes **Deuteronomy 29:4**. But to get the flow of the thought, we'll quote **Deuteronomy 29:2-4** - "**And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: 'You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, [3] the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. [4] But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.'**"

This is the first stage of God's hardening work among Israel. More would come as they persisted in stubborn unbelief. Because they had seen so many manifestations of God's loving care, protection and provision, and were still grumbling and living in rebellious unbelief, Moses told the people God had closed their eyes to the present possibility of **perceiving** His gracious ways in a way that would bring them spiritual benefit.

Think about it. They had seen all the wonders of God's work as they wandered those forty years in the wilderness, without really perceiving them. They had eaten all that food, miraculously provided, without seeing the faithfulness of God in its supply. They had listened to Moses relate the instructions and guidance from God without really hearing it.

Then, to make his point even more strongly, Paul jumps from Deuteronomy, which says God hadn't **given** Israel heart to see these things, to a much stronger statement of the same idea from the prophet Isaiah - **Isaiah 29:10** - "**For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes (the prophets), and covered your heads (the seers).**"

Obviously Paul wants no confusion to remain on the divine nature of this judgment. It is **God**, by His own **Spirit**, who pours out this spiritual blindness on the majority of Israel. And we're taken instantly back to Paul comments about **Pharaoh** in **Romans 9:17-18** - "**For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' [18] So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.**"

Again we see God is no respecter of persons. Jew and Gentile alike are judged for not responding to degrees of grace and revelation received.

Finally, Paul turns his attention to the Psalms to make his final point in this passage: that there is now a **huge dividing line** running right through the people of Israel as a **whole** and the elect faithful remnant **within** Israel, the continuing line establishing the Church as the people of God - **Psalm 69:8-9, 22-23** - "**I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. [9] For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me....22-23....Let their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap. [23] Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually.**"

The plain truth is, we don't read most of the Psalms out loud in church. We don't, because we find their content troubling. So we stick to Psalm 1, 19, 23, 24, 27, 39, 51, 119, etc. The others just seem too violent and vengeful. But this text, used by Paul, gives us a clue as to the real **purpose** of many of the so-called imprecatory Psalms.

The clue comes in the **eighth verse** of this sixty-ninth Psalm - "**I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons.**" This is not a Psalm about the godly praying vengeance on the ungodly **in general**. It's about a devout soul **in Israel**, a faithful follower of God, who feels persecuted and forsaken **by his own people - fellow Jews**. It's a vivid picture of the very situation Paul was describing, many centuries earlier. And Paul's whole point is **surely Israel, if she cared one bit about God's revelation, should have seen and learned and been warned!**

But because she wasn't, she would become increasingly **blind** to the truth and she would have her **back bent for the whips of others**. While Paul's application of these words is to a very specific historic situation in Israel, the abiding principle is **grace is only beautiful when it's received**. Rejected grace accelerates spiritual chaos and increases final judgment. He who has ears, let him hear.

How long would this partial moral hardening of Israel last? That's the question our text takes us into next week.