

## A Remnant Remains

Romans 11:1-10

August 7, 2011

We've been watching Paul's argument that God is sovereign in all that He does, and that God chooses based on His will, not on anything about the people He chooses. This even includes Israel. They were chosen in Abraham to be the vehicle through which God would bring salvation to the world, yet true Israel were those who had the faith of Abraham rather than his blood. Not all of Israel believed, and not all were brought into the new covenant made through Jesus. Meanwhile Gentiles were brought in, based on the same faith that marked true Israel. This brings us up to this morning's text.

Since not all of Israel was saved, even though they were ostensibly the children of the promise, Paul asked the question that should have been floating around in the backs of our heads for the last couple of chapters. *"I ask then: Did God reject his people?"* (v.1) Even though God did reject some of the descendants of those to whom the promise was made, does this mean that God's rejection of the people was total? Has He turned His back on them completely, or is there still hope?

What is Paul's answer to this question? *"By no means!"* (v.1) God has not rejected His people outright, nor have His promises been removed. The promises still stand, and, even though it means a different understanding of who Israel is, God will still do what He said He would do.

Paul used **himself** as the example of the exception to the rule. He was an Israelite. He was a descendent of Abraham through the tribe of Benjamin. He carried Abraham's blood and, unlike most of those who do, he was also in the new covenant. Paul was one Israelite God has chosen to bring in. Since Paul, and others from Israel, were chosen by God then it is clear God's rejection of Israel is not total.

As we look at the writings of the prophets we see this limited rejection by God as a sort of running theme. God punishes His people, but if God punished them as they deserved there would be nobody and nothing left. Therefore, God's punishment is not completely meted out so that there may always be somebody left through whom the promise might continue. This was God's plan from the beginning. Look with me at verses two and three. *"God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: 'Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me'?"* (vv.2,3)

First, we need to understand that God already **knew** what was going to happen. God knows the ending from the start. He knows where each of us is going and what each of us will do. We have already seen that the fact that God chooses some for salvation and some for destruction does not remove any guilt for those counted guilty and should not serve as a source of pride for those who are forgiven. Because God foreknows and predestines does not remove our responsibility or guilt.

So, what was the interaction between this God who foreknows and the prophet Elijah? You remember the contest on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The king, Ahab, had married a woman, Jezebel, who worshiped the Canaanite gods, mainly Baal. She led him to build many altars to Baal around the country and the whole country joined in. Elijah preached against this practice and so Jezebel tried to get Ahab to silence him. It culminated in a contest on the mountain to see whether Baal or Elijah's God was the real one and was to be worshiped. Elijah won the contest, killing over 400 prophets of Baal in the process. Now, Jezebel wanted his life, so Elijah fled into the wilderness. There he made his lament to God, "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your

altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me.”

Elijah had been faithful to play his part in the events, but he did not know what God was up to and he did not see the whole picture. God was doing more than just what involved Elijah. **Elijah** fell into the trap of looking only at himself and his circumstances instead of looking at God and the big picture. He might not have been able to see what the big picture was, but he should not have despaired for his life, especially right after God had given him such a victory. He felt alone and like it was him against the world.

Paul goes on to remind us of that. Look with me at verse 4. *“And what was God’s answer to him? ‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’”* (v.4) What Elijah could not see were the seven thousand other people in the country who had not worshiped the false gods. Jezebel had not turned everyone against God. God had kept a portion of the people **true** to Himself. This was a remnant left of the many, many, more who had turned their backs on Him and sinned. Elijah was not alone. The worship of God would continue and the promises would be kept.

The situation had not changed in Paul’s day. *“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”* (vv.5,6) Just as there was a remnant in Elijah’s day, and again in Jeremiah’s day, there was a remnant in Paul’s day. God was keeping for Himself a portion of the tribes of Israel just as He had always done—He was keeping them by His grace.

Salvation has always been because of God’s **grace**. God put the sacrificial system in place to point to the cost of our sin, especially that the result of sin is death. It was never the sacrifices that saved people, however. They were visible examples of what God was going to do in Jesus. God’s grace has always been at the

forefront of His saving activity. It has never been about what we do. It has always been about what God does. The Jews thought it was by works. God commanded that sacrifices be offered. When Jesus died the veil was torn away—the way to God was opened up through the one death, once and for all.

If salvation depended on anything about us, especially anything we do, then it would no longer be by God’s grace. Something that is earned, in any way, is not a gift. Our salvation has nothing to do with who we are or what we have done or are doing. It has everything to do with who God is, and what He did through Jesus on the cross. Thus it is God’s grace and not our merit by which we are saved. Just like Israel, if God treated us as we deserve, there would be nothing left.

Talking about Israel and the remnant God left, Paul went on. *“What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did.”* (v.7) As we have seen recently, Israel sought righteousness before God, but they sought it through works and the Law. They wanted to make themselves righteous and wanted God to recognize that righteousness rather than to trust God in faith for the righteousness that is only available through His grace. So, they missed the righteousness that they longed for because they were looking for it in the wrong place.

This sounds like people today who want to make themselves look good before God and others. When we have problems we point to what we see as our good qualities and complain that God isn’t honoring us for them instead of recognizing that we actually deserve far worse. As bad as **life** can be it isn’t anywhere near as bad as hell is, and the fact that we are not currently in hell suffering its torments is only because of God’s grace. We cannot stand on anything good we have done or any character traits we think ought to redeem us. Being nice and better than your neighbor makes life

easier in some ways and we are to live good lives, but it counts for nothing with regard to salvation.

Israel sought righteousness before God and did not get it, but the **elect** did. As Paul has already pointed out, God chooses some for salvation, He turns their hearts, and He sets them on the right direction. Righteousness is not available through our effort, only through God's grace. The elect receive it as a gift imparted to them by God as God no longer counts their sins against them because of Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross.

What of the others? They are hardened against God and His ways. *"The others were hardened, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.'* And David says: *'May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.'*" (vv.7-10) Pharaoh was not the only person God hardened.

To support this point Paul referenced three passages from the Old Testament, one from each of the major divisions: law, prophets, and writings. His first reference comes from Moses' instructions to the Israelites before he died and they entered the promised land. Moses had given them the law, but said that God had not given them minds that could really understand it, eyes to see it, or ears to hear it. Alluded to within this reference is a passage from Isaiah. It is the part where Paul talks about the stupor over the people. Isaiah declares God had put the prophets and seers around him into a deep sleep. Finally, Paul took David's desire for his enemies and applied it to Jesus' enemies. Those who do not come to Christ find a snare where they expect to find peace. Even their home and friends become traps and stumbling blocks for them. It darkens their eyes so they cannot see and they are bowed low. Paul saw these things as true of his own people.

All who do not come to God have their **hearts** hardened by Him. God turns some and hardens others. For those whose heart has been turned, we need to be grateful, stop trying to be like the people in the world around us, and allow Him to do His work in us. If we resist, we may be saved, but the process of being made righteous will only be more painful.

God still has a remnant. There are Israelites still being saved today as God opens their eyes and they come to righteousness through Jesus. The remnant goes beyond the physical descendants of Abraham, however. It includes all who come to faith and are made righteous by the gracious will of God and the blood that Jesus shed. More on that in the coming weeks.