

## XXIV. The Remnant of Israel

November 15/16/17, 2016

Romans 11:1-10

**Aim:** To distinguish between two different groups of individuals: the remnant, whom God calls by grace; and the hardened, who are left by God in their sin.

[DSB Note: Almost all major conservative commentaries view Romans 11 (especially 11:25-26) as referring to a time of future conversion of national Israel/Jews to Christianity – ‘and in this way *all Israel* will be saved’ (11:26a). Moo is a clear representative of this view, which is also held by Hughes, Sproul, and MacArthur (with a pre-millennial twist). Paul Barnett sees 11:25-26 as referring to the elect or the remnant within national Israel. However, O. Palmer Robertson (following Calvin), in his book *The Israel of God*, makes the convincing case that Paul really has the completion of the church – composed of both Jews and Gentiles, making up ‘the Israel of God’ – as his primary theme. The following notes will contain both views; the majority view as per normal, while Robertson’s view is highlighted in red at each point.]

A single basic theme can be traced throughout 11:1-32, stated at the beginning and the end of the section: ‘God has not rejected His people, whom He foreknew (v. 2); ‘from the standpoint of election they [Israelites] are beloved because of the patriarchs’ (v. 28). At the same time, Paul provides clear evidence that an important transition in his argument takes place at 11:11, and therefore it is proper to view 11:1-10 and 11:11-32 as separate literary units. Each of these units is introduced the same way: ‘Therefore, I say,’ followed by a question expecting a negative answer, which is reinforced with the emphatic response ‘by no means.’ Each also displays the ending typical of the other major literary units in chapters 9-11: a mixed quotation, or series of quotations, from the OT (cp. 9:25-29; 10:19-21; 11:26b-27).

As he does so often in Romans, Paul uses a rhetorical question to introduce this next stage of his argument: ‘I say, therefore: God has not rejected His people, has He?’ Paul raises this question because of what he has just said about Israel in 10:21: they are a ‘disobedient and contrary’ people.’ But this accusation summarizes Paul’s main point in the whole section 9:30-10:21. At the same time, Paul’s answer to his initial rhetorical question picks up important themes from 9:6-29 also. As he did there, Paul here divides Israel into two groups: a ‘remnant’ enjoying the blessings of salvation and existing by virtue of God’s gracious election and (vv. 5-6), and ‘the rest,’ hardened by God in spiritual obduracy (vv. 7-10). In this section, therefore, and especially in vv. 7-10, Paul gathers together the threads of his teaching about Israel to this point. Despite the refusal of most Jews to recognize in Christ the culmination of salvation history (9:2-3; 9:30-10:21) – a refusal that mirrors God’s own act of hardening – God continues, in faithfulness to His word (9:4-5, 6a), to treat Israel as a whole as His people, manifesting His continuing concern for them in the preservation of a remnant of true believers. At the same time, 11:1-10 lays the foundations for what Paul will teach about Israel’s future in 11:11-32.

*Robertson:* In many places in Romans 11, Paul discusses God’s purpose for the Jew in the present age. Indeed, this theme is important throughout Romans. When Paul begins this epistle, he emphasizes the present significance of the Jew (1:16). Chapters 9 and 10 also emphasize the present significance of Israel (see 9:1-5, 24; 10:1, 11-13). It would be surprising indeed if Romans 11, which fits so integrally into the unit of Romans 9-11, would entirely omit any reference to Israel’s present situation. Most commentators are well aware of the references in Romans 11 to God’s current saving activity among the Jews. However, the pervasiveness of

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these references, as well as their significance for the total thrust of the chapter, is generally overlooked.

### A. The Remnant (Romans 11:1-6)

#### 1. God Has Not Rejected All His People (11:1-2a)

##### a) Rhetorical Question (11:1a)

*<sup>1</sup>I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!*

This was a logical question after the description of Israel's failure to respond to Christ (chapter 10). In verses 1-10, the apostle answers it, where he shows that God had not discarded His people, for there was a believing remnant.

Paul begins once more to engage his critics, but on a slightly different tack. Paul puts these words in the mouth of a Jewish critic. 'If, as you claim, God's word of promise has not failed, then God must have rejected His people. How else can you explain the pitifully small number of Jews who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah?'

The verb 'I say' in the rhetorical introduction to this section forges a link with 10:14-21, where Paul twice uses the same verb to signal transitions in his argument (vv. 18 and 19). At the same time, the 'therefore' shows that Paul now draws an implication from what he has said there. Or, to be more accurate, Paul denies an implication that his readers might have drawn from the previous section. He does so by using a rhetorical pattern very typical of Romans: a question expecting a negative answer – 'God has not rejected His people, has He?' – followed by the strong negative response 'By no means!' The question is certainly a natural one. But as in 3:1, where Paul raises a similar question, Paul refuses to admit the 'logical' conclusion. Despite her disobedience, Israel remains 'the people of God' – in what sense, Paul will explain in the rest of the chapter.

'Rejected' is from *apōtheō*, which means to thrust away. In the New Testament this verb is always used in the middle voice, indicating a thrusting away from oneself. Paul is therefore not asking whether or not God has refused to *receive* His people to Himself but whether or not He has thrust away from Himself the people He long ago received as His own.

Paul immediately answers his own question, declaring what should have been obvious to his believing readers. For those who know God's character and understand His promises to Israel, there could be but one answer: 'May it never be!' Impossible! The phrase *me genoito* ('May it never be!') was the strongest negative in the Greek language. Except for its use in one of Jesus' parables (Luke 20:16), the expression is used elsewhere in the New Testament only by Paul, who employs it fourteen times, ten times in Romans alone.

*Robertson:* Paul's denial that God has cast off His people is generally understood as indicating that God still intends to deal distinctively with Israel in the future. This interpretation is based on a particular reading of the apostle's question. Paul's query, 'Has God rejected His people?' is read to mean, 'Has God rejected ethnic Israel with respect to His special plan for their future?' Obviously, such a construction immediately prejudices the case in favor of those advocating a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. Once the question has been assumed to have this thrust, Paul's 'Let it never be!' simply verifies what is inherent in the assumed form of the question.

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*Robertson:* But the context of the apostle's question suggests an entirely different understanding of its thrust. Paul's inquiry is more radical than many have assumed. He asks, 'Has God rejected ethnic Israel *altogether* as they might relate to His purposes of redemption?' Is there any hope for the continuation of a saving activity of God among Israelites? Have they stumbled so badly that they will fall (altogether) (see v. 11)? Ethnic Israel had rejected their Messiah. They had crucified the Christ. Would it not therefore be quite logical to conclude that God would reject ethnic Israel? If a Gentile rejects Christ, he is lost. Israel as a nation rejected Christ; so should not the nation be lost? Why should God continue to act savingly among the Jews? They received all the special favors of the Lord (9:4-5) and yet rejected His Christ. Why should they not be cast off completely? The evidence cited by Paul in verse 1 to support a negative answer to his question indicates the actual thrust of his thought. Has God cast off His people? No, for the apostle himself is an Israelite!

### b) Paul Has Not Been Rejected (11:1b)

*For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.*

As he did also at the beginning of his discussion of Israel ('my kindred according to the flesh,' 9:3), Paul now again reminds his readers of his identification with Israel. Paul may refer to his Jewish identity to explain his *motivation* in rejecting the notion that God might have rejected Israel so vehemently: as a Jew who still identified with his people, he could hardly countenance God's abandonment of Israel. However, the 'for' introducing the sentence is more likely to introduce a *reason* for Paul's denial. The importance of the remnant concept in this context (vv. 2b-6) makes it more likely that Paul intends here to associate himself with this entity. Paul himself, as a Jewish Christian, is living evidence that God has not abandoned His people Israel. Jews, like Paul, are continuing to be saved and to experience the blessings God promised to His people.

The first proof that God had not rejected His chosen people was that Paul, not only a believer in Christ but also an apostle (1:1), was himself 'an Israelite.' Although Paul does not mention it here, the vast majority of early Christians were Jews. Before his conversion, he had been the most fanatical Christ-hating and Christian-hating Jew in Israel. If such a Christ-rejecting Jew as himself could be brought to saving faith, the gospel had power to save *any* Jew. More than that, however, Paul's own conversion made it obvious that God could not possibly have rejected all Israel. He was living proof that, just as God's promises to Israel do not include all individual Jews, so His judgment and rejection of Israel do not include all individual Jews.

Paul's own conversion was evidence of a believing remnant. Paul's case is encouraging. He had been the foremost calculating, implacable, bloodthirsty enemy of the Church. God had sovereignly hunted him down, smote him on the Damascus Road, and brought him kicking and struggling into the Kingdom. Paul, a hardened religious man with blood on his hands, came to Christ, so there is no hope for anyone. By the authority of the Word of God we can say that no one is beyond the grace of God. People like Paul are living demonstrations that God is not through with the Jews. What a beautiful gospel to preach!

*Robertson:* In answer to the question, 'Has God rejected His people?' Paul identifies himself as living proof that God's purposes for Israel are being realized in the present era. He himself is a trophy of the grace of God. Paul does not respond to his own question by specifically asserting that God has not cast off His people Israel with respect to some distinctive future reserved for them. Rather, the apostle specifically points to concrete evidence of God's present activity

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among the Jews. He himself is an Israelite, thus indicating that the grace of God is currently working among Jews.

*Robertson:* In order to answer his question, Paul does not marshal evidence that relates to the future of the Jews. He points instead to the reality of God's working in the present. He himself is an Israelite, thereby establishing that God continues to include Jews in His purposes of redemption. The apostle's answer deals not with the nation of Israel in the distant future, but with the condition of Israel in the present age. The apostle himself is an Israelite, and he shares in the salvation brought by the Messiah.

### c) *Israel Has Not Been Rejected (11:2a)*

<sup>2</sup>*God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.*

Paul asserts positively what he denied in v. 1a: 'God has not rejected His people.' The wording reflects Ps. 94:14 and 1 Sam. 12:22. The relative clause Paul adds to this assertion – 'whom He foreknew' – does not simply define 'His people' but adds a reason for this assertion. For the 'know' in the verb 'foreknow' refers to God's election. The temporal prefix, 'fore-' (*pro-*), indicates further that God's choosing of Israel took place before any action or status on the part of Israel that might have qualified God's choice. How could God reject a people whom He in a gracious act of choice had made His own? As Paul has made clear earlier in the letter (3:3-4), human sinfulness and disobedience cannot cancel His pledged word.

Who are the recipients of this gracious choice of God's? If the clause 'whom He foreknew' is restrictive, Paul would be asserting only that God had not rejected a certain body of elect persons from within Israel. This view has the benefit of bringing strict consistency into Paul's use of the verb 'foreknow': in both of this verse and in 8:29, it would refer to God's choosing individuals for salvation. And Paul certainly argues for an election to salvation of individuals within the larger body of national Israel (9:6-29); but the context demands that Paul here be speaking of God's election of the people as a whole. For it is this national entity whose status is called into question by what Paul has said in 9:30-10:21 and about whom Paul then asks in v. 1. Furthermore, v. 28, which appears to reassert the point Paul makes here in v. 2, ascribes election to Israel as a nation also. Paul, then, uses the verb 'foreknow' to indicate God's election, the purpose of that election being determined by the context. In 8:29, where all those 'foreknown' are also justified and glorified, the election is clearly to salvation. In this verse, however, Paul reflects the common OT and Jewish corporate sense of election, according to which God's choosing of the nation of Israel guarantees blessings and benefits to the people as a whole but does not guarantee salvation for every single Israelite (9:6-29).

The second proof that God's setting aside of Israel is only partial is that the Lord has always preserved a remnant for Himself. From Pentecost to the present day, Christ's church has never been without believing Jews. Paul is not referring to individual regenerate Jews or Gentiles—although the basic promise would certainly apply to them—but to Israel as a nation, the corporate body of God's chosen people, who are the focus of Romans 9-11. The 'people' mentioned in 11:2 are the 'disobedient and obstinate' nation of Israel, to whom the apostle has just referred (10:21). In this context, 'foreknow' (from *proginōskō*) does not simply mean to be aware of something beforehand but to determine that it will come to pass. Israel is the only *nation* that God has foreknown and predetermined to be His people and the recipients of His love and grace (cp. Dt. 7:6-8). Because God foreknew and predetermined before the foundation of the earth to set His special love upon Israel forever, He can never totally reject them. From the

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day God called Abraham until the day Christ returns in glory and judgment, there has not been and will never be a time when the earth will be without believing Jews.

God is incapable of rejecting a people he foreknew from the foundation of the world, the elect, of whom Paul has been writing since chapter 8. Here he brings the concept of election to the Jewish people. He wrote earlier, ‘For they are not all Israel who are of Israel’ (9:6). He argued that the circumcised were not automatically saved but only those circumcised in heart. Not all from the seed of Abraham were chosen from the foundation of the world. Paul does not want his readers to conclude from all the weighty things he has said about the Jews – their rejection of the Messiah and despising the gospel – that God has rejected them totally. Paul’s readers cannot come to that conclusion because Paul himself is numbered among the Jews.

### 2. God Has Called A Remnant by Grace (11:2b-6)

#### a) *A Remnant (11:2b-4)*

##### (1) Historical Reference (11:2b)

*Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?*

Paul has already hinted at his reason for denying the notion that God has rejected His people Israel: in his own person, an Israelite who is saved by faith in Christ, he gives evidence of God’s continuing concern for Israel (v. 1a). Paul now makes explicitly this line of reasoning and broadens it by reference to the concept of a remnant. He first provides biblical support for the concept. ‘Or do you not know’ implies that Paul thinks his readers will be familiar with ‘the Scripture’ and its implications that he is about to cite. Paul identifies the passage with a formula similar to ones found in Jewish literature: ‘in the section about Elijah.’ He further specifies the text as the one in which ‘Elijah appeals’ to God against Israel. ‘Appeals’ translates the verb *εντυχανω* (*entugchanō*), which means ‘petition, intercede.’ The intercession is usually a positive plea on behalf of someone, as in Romans 8:27. Here, however, the petition of Elijah is not ‘on behalf of’ Israel, but ‘against’ them.

##### (1) Quotation of 1 Kings 19:10, 14, 18 (11:3-4)

<sup>3</sup>*‘Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.’* <sup>4</sup>*‘But what is God's reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’*

The passage to which Paul refers is the story of King Ahab’s attack on the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 19:1-18). After learning of Ahab’s slaughter of the prophets, Jezebel threatens her nemesis Elijah with the same fate (vv. 1-2). Elijah then flees to the wilderness, where he bemoans his fate (vv. 3-14) and where the Lord comforts him with the assurance that he is working out His plan for Israel and the surrounding nations (vv. 15-18). From this passage, Paul quotes Elijah’s lament about being left alone after the slaughter of the prophets (v. 3 – 1 Kings 19:10 and 14) and the Lord’s concluding reassurance to Elijah (v. 4 – 1 Kings 19:18b). Paul tailors the text to suit his purpose without, however, changing their meaning.

The 1 Kings passage, which is one of the seminal ‘remnant’ texts in the OT, suits Paul’s purpose admirably, with its contrast between the apparent hopeless state of Israel and God’s assurance of His continuing care for the people through His preservation of a remnant of true believers. It is possible that Paul also finds a parallel between Elijah and himself: each is a key salvation-

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historical figure, is confronted with the apparent downfall of spiritual Israel, but finds new hope in God's preservation of a remnant of true believers. For God's preservation of a remnant is not only evidence of His present faithfulness to Israel; it is also a pledge of hope for the future of the people.

The remnant of believing Jews is larger than it may appear. Paul notes that Elijah discovered this very truth. Elijah had withstood the prophets of Baal, then outran Ahab's chariot to Jezreel—a distance of eighteen miles. By the end of the day he was absolutely worn out, even in the flush of victory. Poor old Elijah thought he was all alone, but there 7,000 others! Paul perhaps felt a special kinship with Elijah, sometimes feeling as if he were the only one left. Today Israel is in national apostasy, but there are more Jewish believers than many of us think. They are a reminder that God is not through with His covenant people.

God is faithful and God is powerful. Elijah needed to know, as did Paul's Jewish critics, as today we also need to remember, that *God* had 'kept' for Himself thousands who were faithful to Him. When things look bleak in the churches and church leaders disappoint, as they sometimes do, we easily adopt the 'Elijah' attitude ('I only am left'). But we must not leave God out of our reckoning.

In the midst of Israel's hellish reversion to paganism, the soul of Elijah was tried to the uttermost. He experienced persecution daily and became a fugitive from the power of the throne. He was exhausted with living. In the midst of it he cried out to God. This cry from the prophet Elijah was uttered during a terrible time—perhaps the worst time—of apostasy in the history of Old Testament Israel. Elijah was suffering from the 'Elijah Syndrome'; what true believers experience when surrounded by apostasy. Apostasy is not the same as paganism. An apostate is one who, at some point, professed the true God. Apostasy can take place only in the hose of God. People become apostate by repudiating the faith they once professed. Whole churches can become apostate. When churches denounce essential truths of the Christian faith, they are apostate churches. Denominations—Protestant denominations—can become apostate. True Christians might be in such churches, but they should not be. When a group becomes apostate, we have a moral obligation to leave and distance ourselves from it. Not every Christian does that, however. Multitudes of Christians are still working, striving, laboring, and preaching within apostate bodies all over the world. Those who do might experience the Elijah Syndrome.

Paul tells his readers the response Elijah received. Not just one or five or even one hundred—God has kept for Himself seven thousand from within that godless nation. They had not kept themselves for God, but God had kept them. Some might have been found within the courts of Ahab and Jezebel; others were perhaps in areas that Elijah would not have guessed. Wherever they were, there were seven thousand preserved from apostasy by God Himself. The only reason you can give that you are not an apostate is that the Lord God in His sweet grace and mercy has preserved you. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints only makes sense in light of God's preservation of the saints. The Lord God in His grace preserves His people.

*b) By Grace (11:5-6)*

(1) Chosen by Grace (11:5)

<sup>5</sup>*So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.*

Throughout the Old Testament God speaks of preserving a remnant. He has preserved His remnant, which He determined to redeem from the foundation of the world. That is why the

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church of Jesus Christ will never be erased from the face of the earth. Parishes may fall and denominations may crumble, but God will preserve His elect in every generation. You will never be asked to stand alone in a dying world, because God has a people who cannot fail. The church belongs to Christ.

Paul now makes the comparison between Elijah's situation and his own explicit. As God had 'left for Himself' a solid body of faithful worshipers in Elijah's time, so 'at the present time,' the time of eschatological fulfillment, He has brought into existence a 'remnant.' No more than the defection of Israelites to the worship of Baal in Elijah's time could the widespread Jewish indifference to the fulfillment of God's promises in Paul's day invalidate God's faithfulness to Israel and thereby cause His word to 'fall' (cp. 9:6a). But, Paul is quick to add – reminding us of the principle that he developed at great length in 9:6-29 – this remnant has come into being as the result of God's gracious election. There surfaces here again the careful balance that Paul preserves throughout Romans when dealing with Israel. He affirms the continuing significance of Israel in the stage of salvation history that the gospel has inaugurated. But he denies that this continuing significance owes anything to Israel's intrinsic merit or to her achievement in obeying the law (note a similar balance in 2:17-3:8; 9:1-29; 11:17-32). Jews are no different from Gentiles at this point: only by God's gracious intervention can they be transformed from sinners doomed to die into righteous people destined for eternal life (cp. 3:9, 23-24; 5:12-21).

In verse 5, Paul draws his conclusions from Elijah's example. Let the Jewish critics grasp that, as in the time of Elijah, there *is* (and there *will be*) a 'remnant' (*leimma*; cp. 9:27, *hupo-leimma*) of Jewish believers. There was but a tiny group of Jewish Christians in apostolic times. There continues to be a 'remnant' of Jewish Christians, whether in Israel or elsewhere. According to the meaning of Paul's words, there will always be at least some Christian believers among the Jews. This, surely, is an encouragement to press on with ministry among the Jews.

'Gracious choice' ('chosen by grace') translates *eklogēn charitos* and could be rendered 'election by grace.' As is true of all believers in all ages, the believing 'remnant' of Jews during Paul's time were not elected by virtue of their spiritual worthiness or moral good works—and obviously not simply on the basis of their racial descent—but 'according to God's' sovereign election, His 'gracious choice.' Before the foundation of the world, God graciously predetermined His choice of those physical descendants of Abraham who also would become His spiritual descendants.

*Robertson:* Paul emphasizes the present position of Israel with the phrase 'at the present time' (*en to nyn kairo*). In the current situation, a remnant of Israel remains. Paul's discussion of the remnant as it has been preserved throughout redemptive history is intended to alleviate his readers' concern for the present condition of Israel. Not all Jews currently believe the gospel, to be sure. But it has never been God's purpose to save the totality of ethnic Israel.

*Robertson:* Verse 5 further summarizes Paul's answer to the question posed in verse 1. Has God justly cast off ethnic Israel, so that no hope of redemption within the nation remains? No, for 'even...at this present time,' in conformity with God's dealings with Israel in the past, 'there is a remnant according to the election of grace.' Paul's answer to his own question does not spell out the details of a massive turning of the Jews to Christ at some distant date. Rather, his answer deals with the present condition of Israel in the gospel era. Indeed, the apostle's answer does indicate that ethnic Israel has a future. But this future is an integral part of the current era of gospel proclamation.

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### (2) Insistence on Grace (11:6)

<sup>6</sup>*But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*

Paul explains just what such a *gracious* election entails. The principle of grace is antithetical to that of ‘works’; if God has elected the individuals who make up the remnant ‘by grace,’ it follows that He could not have elected them on the basis of works. The word ‘works’ (*εργα, erga*) refers to anything that human beings do. Since Paul’s focus is on the basis for the election of Israel, it is quite likely that he would think of these human actions as done specifically in obedience to the Mosaic law. Paul’s polemic, while focused on Israel because of his particular situation, is applicable to all human beings and finds its ultimate basis in the human condition. Because of their sin but also simply because of their creaturely status, people can make no claim to God.

If human beings could by their works secure the blessings of God, grace would ‘no longer’ be grace. For grace demands that God be perfectly free to bestow His favor on whomever He chooses. But if God’s election were based on what human beings would do, His freedom would be violated and He would no longer be acting in grace. For Paul, however, the gracious character of God’s activity is a theological axiom, automatically ruling out any idea that would conflict with it.

Once more Paul insists that ‘grace...no[t]...works’ is the only basis for Jews acknowledging Christ. God’s ‘election’ demands that His ‘grace’ is the only route to knowing Jesus as the Messiah. If that way was by means of ‘works,’ it could not be ‘by grace.’ The one must cancel out the other. But this is precisely why Jewish response to Christ has been so minimal. When confronted with Jesus of Nazareth and the apostles’ preaching of Christ, Jews rejected the reality of His identity and His saving work, insisting instead on securing ‘righteousness’ with God based on ‘works of the Law’ (see 9:31-10:3). The symbols of their covenant – the Temple, the Law, the religious calendar, the dietary laws, and circumcision – were more important to them than the One who had so recently come among them.

The remnant is according to the election of grace. The two concepts of grace and works are mutually exclusive. Grace by definition is unmerited, unearned, and undeserved. Paul makes this simple—it is one or the other, grace or works. Our only hope is grace.

### **B. The Hardened (Romans 11:7-10)**

The rhetorical question ‘What then?’ marks the beginning of the last section of this paragraph. Here Paul takes up an important implication of his teaching about the remnant in vv. 2b-6. Paul has asserted that the existence of a remnant, Jews who are Christians, demonstrates that God has not rejected His people. In 9:26-29, Paul uses the remnant concept with a negative nuance: though all Jews are ‘Israelites’ (9:4), it is *only* ‘the remnant that will be saved.’ In 11:2b-6, however, Paul cites the remnant with a positive purpose: the continuing validity of God’s election of Israel is manifested in the fact that there *is* a remnant. Nevertheless, the very notion of a remnant who are receiving the blessings of God’s election implies that many other Israelites are not. It is to this group that Paul draws particular attention in vv. 7-10.



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### 1. Two Groups within Israel (11:7)

#### a) Israel (11:7a)

<sup>7</sup>What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.

Paul begins generally with a summing up of the situation of Israel as he has outlined it thus far in chapters 9-11. He distinguishes three entities: Israel as a corporate whole, the elect, and the hardened. As a corporate entity, Israel has ‘not attained’ what she ‘was seeking.’ Paul here repeats in similar terms what he said about Israel as a whole in 9:31: ‘Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not attain that law.’ This parallel allows us to fill in the missing object of the verbs in this assertion: it was ‘righteousness,’ a right standing with God, that Israel sought but failed to attain.

The phrase ‘is seeking for’ is from *epizēteō*, which indicates intense, diligent seeking. The Jews of Paul’s day were fanatically religious, a condition the apostle acknowledged in the previous chapter (10:2). And because their zeal focused on their own false righteousness rather than on God’s true righteousness, ‘they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God’ (10:3). Consequently, they did not acknowledge or receive Jesus Christ, who ‘is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (10:4). But those whom God had chosen for Himself *did* seek His righteousness and graciously obtained it.

What was Israel ‘seeking’ that ‘she did not find’? The answer is found by reference to 9:31-10:2. The coming of Christ to Israel gave the nation the opportunity to accept or reject the messianic ‘Stone’ prophesied by Isaiah. But they preferred their ‘Law’ to the Lord’s Anointed One, the Messiah. In rejecting her king and His ‘righteousness,’ Israel *de factor* was seeking to establish her own ‘right standing’ with God. This she did by ‘works of the Law, that is, by the religious practices of Judaism rather than ‘by faith,’ which would have been seen in their turning to the One who had come. By Christ’s presence among them, Israel’s beliefs, values, and relationship with God were revealed as based on self-effort.

#### b) The Elect (11:7b)

*The elect obtained it...*

What Israel as a whole did not attain, however, ‘the elect’ did. Here again Paul echoes his earlier teaching, where he contrasted Israel’s failure to attain righteousness (9:31) with the Gentiles’ success in doing so (9:30). The context favors a restriction of ‘the elect’ to Jews here since Paul’s concern seems to be to distinguish two groups *within* Israel.

Some, that is, ‘the elect’ among Israel did, indeed, find ‘righteousness’ from God. Paul is doubtless thinking of the disciples of Jesus and others like himself who have come to recognize Jesus as the ‘One who was to come.’ By grace, and through the preaching of Christ, the elect found ‘righteousness,’ though by faith not works. What, then, of ‘the rest’ who did not?

#### c) The Rest (11:7c)

*...but the rest were hardened...*

Contrasted, then, with ‘the elect,’ who have by virtue of God’s gracious choice attained a right standing with Him, are ‘the rest,’ who have been ‘hardened.’ Despite a change in verbs in the Greek, the hardening Paul speaks of here is the same as that which he has described in 9:18: a spiritual insensitivity that prevents people from responding to God or to His message of salvation. And since in both 9:18 and in the following verse Paul ascribes this hardening to God,

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it is clear that God is also the implied agent of the passive verb in this verse: ‘the rest have been hardened (by God).’ Calvin understood this hardening as a pre-temporal decree of God by which He destined some to eternal damnation. And Reformed theologians have usually followed Calvin’s lead, finding in this verse support for the doctrine of reprobation. God’s hardening permanently binds people in the sin that they have chosen for themselves. This is not to say that God chooses which people to harden based on the sin or failure to believe of those individuals. It is rather that God’s hardening is to be seen as affection individuals who are already sinners. Paul keeps God’s hardening of people and their own refusal to believe in tension.

Why have the rest remained in unbelief? Paul explains that they have been judicially hardened because they persist in the pattern of works, thinking they can make themselves righteous. That is, they were hardened as a judgment for their unbelief. Hardening happened to Pharaoh, but it was no surprise in him. But here it is God’s own people who are hardened to Him. ‘Were hardened’ is passive, indicating that the hardening was caused by an outside power. That outside power was none other than God.

While the Greek word ‘hardened’ differs from that used earlier in relationship to Pharaoh (9:18), there can be no doubt that Paul intends the readers to make a connection between the ‘hardening’ of Pharaoh and the ‘hardening’ of Israel. The passive voice ‘were hardened’ indicates that *God* ‘hardened the rest.’ This is the antinomy, or apparent contradiction, between two principles. On the one hand, *Israel* hardened her heart and chose to reject Christ (cp. 10:16), just as Pharaoh rejected God’s word that Moses spoke to him. Yet, on the other hand, it must be recognized that God, being God, is the ultimate source of all actions. Thus, *God* hardened the rest. It is impossible to reconcile these polarities by human logic, though it is important we accept both elements. There is a solemn warning for us. Disobedience to God and unbelief do not leave us unaffected. Disobedience progressively hardens us to the Word of God so that we may reach a point when we do not hear Him speaking to us.

### 2. Quotation of Deuteronomy 29:4 & Isaiah 29:10 (11:8)

...<sup>8</sup>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.’

The quotation in v. 8, introduced with Paul’s typical formula, ‘even as it is written,’ takes most of its wording and its basic structure from Deuteronomy 29:4. This verse comes from one of Moses’ final exhortations to the people of Israel before they crossed the Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land. Moses reminds them of the great acts of God on the behalf but recognizes that they cannot fully appreciate what the Lord has done for them, for ‘the LORD has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear.’ Paul changes the original negative statement – ‘the LORD has not given’ – into a positive one – ‘God has given.’ This change suits better the purpose for which Paul cites the verse, for he is supporting the notion of a positive act of hardening on God’s part (v. 7b). But Paul is probably also influenced in making this change by another OT text from which he takes some of the wording of his quotation. The phrase ‘spirit of stupor’ comes from Isaiah 20:10. Paul’s attention was probably drawn to this verse by both the similarity in content with Deuteronomy 29:4 and by the verbal parallel involving ‘eyes’ that are blinded to the reality of spiritual things.

Paul has combined two significant passages from the Greek Old Testament. In the first, from Deuteronomy 29:4, the Israelites have ‘seen’ the miracle of their escape through the Red Sea but the Lord has ‘not given them a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear’ until forty

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ears later. In the second, from Isaiah 29:10, the Lord has given the disobedient people a ‘spirit of deep sleep’ so that the words of Isaiah will be to them like ‘the words of a sealed book.’ The Greek word for ‘drowsiness’ (‘sleep’ or ‘stupor’) is *katanuxis*, which is an intensification of *nux*, ‘night,’ and captures the idea of torpor or extreme sleepiness. Most likely Paul chose these passages pointedly. The Israelites have seen, but yet have not ‘seen,’ the miracle of the Exodus or the miracles of Jesus. The Israelites have heard but not ‘heard’ the words of Isaiah or the words of Paul; God gave in both instances ‘a spirit of drowsiness.’

Deuteronomy represents the law and Isaiah the prophets. Both the law and the prophets testify to God’s sovereign and pre-determined hardening of hearts. But that hardening is neither capricious nor unjust. God hardens only those hearts who, in rejecting His gracious offer of righteousness, harden themselves to His grace.

From an observation of the setting of the quotation, it is clear that God did not give His people deaf ears to mock them any more than He gave them blind eyes to taunt them. What was involved was a judicial punishment for failure to use God-given faculties to perceive His manifested power and to glorify Him. What Paul says here about hardening should be sobering to both Jew and Gentile, for the principle is universal: if anyone hears the truth and does not respond to it, the time can come in which he or she will be incapable of responding (cp. Mt. 13:12-15).

The people of Israel were blind because God had made them blind. Their blindness was punishment for their sin. They did not want to see the things of God, so, as He has done throughout redemptive history, He abandoned them to their sinful desire. This is God’s poetic justice. If you do not want to hear the Word of God, be careful, because God will make you deaf, and then you will never hear it. If you do not want to see the kingdom of God, whatever you see even vaguely now will be taken away. If you are not alive and energetic to the things of the Spirit, be careful that God does not visit you with the spirit of lethargy, taking away from you whatever zeal you have. When God works that way, it is always a punishment for evil inclinations.

### 3. Quotation of Psalm 69:22-23 (11:9-10)

<sup>9</sup>*And David says, ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; <sup>10</sup>let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.’*

The second quotation comes from another passage that has played a prominent role in helping early Christians understand Jesus, Psalm 69. This interpretive tradition, according to which David’s own sentiments in the psalm are applied to Jesus, makes it natural for Paul to apply to the enemies of Jesus Christ what David says about his own enemies. Paul’s attention was probably drawn to these verses also by their reference to ‘darkened eyes,’ a verbal link to Dt. 29:4 and Is. 29:10. Verses 22-23 in the psalm introduce David’s prayer that the Lord might bring disaster on those who are persecuting him. What David prayed would happen to his persecutors, Paul suggests, God has brought upon those Jews who have resisted the gospel. Paul probably did not intend to apply the details of the quotation to the Jews of his own day. Thus it is fruitless to inquire about what the ‘table’ might stand for, or what ‘bending the backs’ might connote.

Paul has taken these words verbatim from the LXX version of Psalm 69:22. Strikingly, the whole psalm speaks of David’s sufferings at the hands of persecutors among his own people.

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Metaphorically speaking, these persons have put gall in David's food and vinegar in his drink. David is praying that the 'table' God places before them will likewise be bitter. Most likely Paul has chosen this text because of his kinship with David in sufferings from his own people (cp. Ps. 69:8). Paul's testimony to Jesus has brought him much pain from fellow Israelites. Paul suffered greatly at Jewish hands (1 Th. 2:14-15; 2 Cor. 11:24, 26). Nonetheless, while David prayed for God permanently to punish the fractious Israelites, Paul, for his part, looked for the ultimate salvation of his people.

A person's 'table' is generally thought of as a place of safety, feasting, and sustenance. But the 'table' of the ungodly and self-righteous will 'become a snare and a trap.' The Jews considered God's Word, in particular the Torah, to be their spiritual sustenance—which indeed it was. But because of their rebellious unbelief, that Word became a judgment on them, 'a stumbling block and a retribution.' As she continued to reject God, Israel became progressively more spiritually blind—so blind that she could not recognize her own Messiah and Savior. Just as David had prayed in righteous indignation against the sins of his own people, Israel's 'eyes' were 'darkened to see not.' Because Israel refused to see the things of God, God judicially ratified her willing blindness. 'Bend their backs' suggests the hunched over position in which blind people sometimes walk as they grope their way on a path they cannot see that leads to a destination they do not seek.

Elsewhere, in Psalm 23, David writes: 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies' (v. 5a). This is the table of the banquet feast, a table of blessing prepared by God made visible to the enemies of the kingdom. Concerning this imagery Luther said that ultimately this table, bestowed by the Lord God in His grace upon the nation of Israel, is the table of His Word. He has spread the banquet feast with the oracles of God.

The supreme advantage that God gave to Israel was His Word. He did not give it to the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or the Acadians; He gave His Word to Israel. They had the oracles of God. David saw how his enemies hated the Word of God and the church in its Old Testament manifestation: 'Let their table become a snare before them, and their well-being a trap' (Ps. 69:22). When God's enemies come to that table and see the sumptuous food placed upon it, like a trap baited with meat that will spring when the animal pounces, the table will be a snare, a hammer on the heads of those who hate it. Luther, looking at Psalm 69:22, said it is like a flower in the field whose nectar is used to make honey for the bee, but the nectar is poison to the spider. To those who are being saved, the Word of God is sweetness and honey, but for those who are perishing, it is poison. May it be for you nothing but sweetness and honey so that you may feast on the table God has prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For next time: Read Romans 11:11-24.