

A Remnant, Chosen by Grace

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on April 3, 2022.

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. 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? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.” And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever” (Romans 11:1–10).¹

Although we read it as a book, it is important to remember that Romans is a letter, and we should read it as it was written. In substance, it is of course *more* than a letter—the very Word of God. And so, we read it and study it intently even intricately to glean from God’s special revelation, to know his will. So rich and deep is this divine truth that we dare not rush through it but study it diligently verse by verse. But none of this changes its form: It is a letter.

So, when Paul asks a question, such as, “has God rejected his people?”, it is imperative that we stop and understand it in the overall flow of the letter. For example, beginning in the ninth chapter, Paul laments Israel’s rejection of Christ, but it is a lamentation that trusts in the sovereignty of God. As God is sovereign, Paul is confident that all whom God has predestined will be saved. Uniting this with his concern for Israel, Paul makes the distinction that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (9:6), a distinction between natural Israel and spiritual Israel, consisting of Jew and Gentile alike.

While Paul’s distinction between natural and spiritual Israel is hard to understand, God’s sovereign purpose will prevail in the salvation of the elect. Why he will do this is his sovereign prerogative. How he will do this is according to the means of his sovereign appointment: the gospel of Jesus Christ. Understanding this, one might presume then that God has rejected Israel for their rejection of Christ. It’s a fair presumption, but is it accurate? According to Paul, “By no means!” (11:1).

Paul submits himself as a living example: “For I myself am an Israelite,” Paul explains, not a Gentile by birth but “a descendant of Abraham,” not a child of Esau but of Jacob and “a member of the tribe of Benjamin” (11:1). If God rejected Israel, how could an Israelite like Paul be saved through faith in Christ? In a sense, Paul’s point is: If God saves one child of Israel, then he has not rejected Israel.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Of course, the confusion comes with the assumption that the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob flow unequivocally to all of their natural descendants. But Paul's example is helpful here too. As an Israelite and a professing Christian, he is the exception, a believing minority in a land of unbelievers, a child of Israel by nature but a child of God by faith.

Indeed, Israel was a people chosen by God. As Moses declared to the assembly,

The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deut. 7:6-8).

The same could be said of no other nation on earth. As Paul said of his "kinsmen," they are "Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (9:4-5). Yet, such favor did not guarantee salvation, only faith in Christ can do that. And only those whom God foreknew believe, or as John Calvin puts it, "the fruit of adoption does not exist in all the children of the flesh, for secret election precedes."² God has not rejected those whom he foreknew.

To explain this, in the ninth chapter Paul quotes Isaiah, saying, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved..." (9:27). Israel's rejection of Christ does not necessitate God's rejection of his elect within Israel. It's like Elijah's low point on Mount Horeb. Fearful of Jezebel's death threat and disheartened by the lack of visible faithfulness in Israel, Elijah assumed he was the last believer in the land, leading him to pray, "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life: (11:3). In a nation known as God's people, Elijah could only see a people blind, deaf, and cursed. But God, who preserves his elect, knows better, telling Elijah, "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (11:4). As God revealed to Elijah, so he does to Paul: "at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (11:6).

Blind, Deaf, and Cursed

"What then?", Paul asks of Israel. What happened, and what is the status of Israel? In short, "Israel," not all but as a whole, "failed to obtain what it was diligently seeking" (11:7 NET). But to understand this we must ask a few more questions. What specifically did Israel fail to obtain? They failed to obtain the righteousness of God. Why? Because they pursued it through works of the law (9:31-32), not through faith. Did Christ's coming correct their failed pursuit? No, they were hardened, spiritually blind, deaf, and cursed.

² John Calvin, "Commentary on Romans," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom38/calcom38.xv.i.html>

Just as Paul says, “it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy,” and “he hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:16,18), so God hardened Israel. Paraphrasing Isaiah and Deuteronomy, Paul says of Israel, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day” (11:8). The testimony of God’s grace was given to Israel, from Abraham’s faith to Christ’s incarnation, but a “spirit of stupor,” or insensibility, kept them from believing. How often did Jesus introduce his teaching, “He who has ears, let him hear” (Matt. 13:9), or teach with parables, “because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matt. 13:13)? Quoting Isaiah, Jesus said, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive” (Matt. 13:14).

Translating David’s plea for vengeance into a pronouncement of judgment, Paul says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever” (11:9-10). God’s blessing upon Israel became a “snare,” his revelation a “trap,” his Messiah a “stumbling block,” his mercy a “retribution.”

Such a pronouncement is reminiscent of God’s Word to Israel’s priests through Malachi, in which God said, “If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart” (Mal. 2:2). God indeed blessed Israel but such blessing did not lead them to repentance and faith but works-based religion and rejection of Christ. Cursed, indeed.

As it was for Israel, so it is for all who are blessed by God but do not trust in Christ. Consider, for example, all the blessings we enjoy in the New Covenant church: the sign and seal of God’s Covenant of Grace in baptism; communion with God and one another in the Lord’s Supper; a complete canon of Scripture to be read, meditated upon, and preached; the Lord’s Day, that we may assemble in worship and rest from our labors. All of these, and many more, are blessings from the Lord, but if we reject what our baptism signifies, eat and drink without examination, disregard the revealed will of God, and forsake assembling for ease and entertainment, what does this say of the condition of our heart? Shall we receive the blessings of God without knowing that blessings become curses apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and obedience to his commands? Do we not already see evidence of this in our own country where we are reaping the harvest of decades of “cultural Christianity”? Even so, God has always preserved a remnant, those chosen, believing, and saved.

Chosen, Believing, and Saved

Though Paul was an Israelite, God did not reject him. Though he was a natural descendent of Abraham, God preserved him through faith. Though he was a member of the tribe of Benjamin, God foreknew him, and “those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30). And Paul was not alone but part of “a remnant, chosen by grace” (11:5).

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul explains what he experienced firsthand, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, nor a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). “Otherwise,” Paul says, “grace would no longer be grace” (11:6). And this gospel truth formed a spiritual chasm between Paul and his kinsmen. By God’s unmerited favor alone, Paul believed the gospel, transforming his works-based religion of self-glory to the gospel of God’s glory. For, it is God’s sovereign grace that separates the remnant from the whole.

And this truth puts the focus squarely where it belongs, off of us and what we can do and on to God and what he has done and is doing. Too often, American Christians, in their commingling of Church and State, lament what they presume to be the demise of the church, as they witness the erosion of Christian values. But this is not only an improper commingling but an inaccurate deduction. Don’t let your assumption of “lost” Christian values lead you to think the same of Christ’s church. Calvin reminds us, “the church, which may not appear as anything to our sight, is nourished by the secret providence of God. ...for God has a way, accessible to himself but concealed from us, by which he wonderfully preserves his elect, even when all seems lost.”³ Christian, rest assured, “there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (11:5).

Furthermore, we need not strive to solve what we perceive to be a problem by trying to make the church more like the world or reactionarily hiding in isolation from the world. Both are extremes, flowing from the same bad theology: self-preservation. Let us remember that on one hand Elijah stood alone when he mocked Baal’s prophets and the fire of the Lord fell from heaven (1 Kings 18), but on the other hand he was not really alone when God revealed, “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (11:4). Because God loves his church, we must continue to worship faithfully, fellowship regularly, and encourage one another consistently, before a watching world. Or, as James Boice reminds us, “That is what the church is to be, after all—the company of those who are living for God and are encouraging one another to live for him even in this present evil world.”⁴ Christian, rest assured, “there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (11:5).

Finally, let us rejoice and give thanks for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. Let us never forget our heavenly Father “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:4-6). How can he who predestined us for adoption reject us? He cannot; he will not, and this is true for Jew and Gentile alike.

God has always had a people, preserved and preserving, set apart and sustained, a chosen race of royal priests, a holy people possessed by God, not blind nor deaf and never cursed, but chosen, believing, and saved, a remnant, saved by grace.

³ John Calvin in James Montgomery Boice, *God and History: Romans 9-11* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 3:1301.

⁴ Ibid.