
“A Remnant, Chosen By Grace”

ROMANS 11:1-6

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AT A GLANCE

It may feel like the days are getting darker and more evil. It may feel like the faithful are fewer and farther between. It may feel like the world and the devil are winning. You may feel discouraged, disheartened, and disillusioned. But take heart, there will always be a remnant, chosen by grace! Kept by God's sovereign hand...preserved by him...preserved for him.

INTRODUCTION

I recently spent time this week at one of our men's place of employment. I was shocked at the open and morality all around him. The darkness he works in on a daily basis. He told me that he is the only one at his workplace who loves the Lord, who serves Christ. He is light in a very Dark World. Perhaps you feel the same way; like you're the only one left in the world trying to do right by the Lord. Praise the Lord for the Church! But even that is no guarantee of godliness or holy fellowship.

This can be truly discouraging for someone who is truly trying to follow and honor the Lord. It can leave you ready to throw your arms up in frustration. But God is still in control! This is the tenor of Romans 11:1-6. When all hope seems lost, Paul reminds us that God is sovereignly preserving a remnant chosen by grace.

ROMANS 11:1-6

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. ²God 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.” ⁴But what is God's reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

NO WAY!

Verse 1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? This question comes in light of what we've read in Romans 9 and 10, *“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”* Romans 10:21

“Seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.” Romans 10:3

“They have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge.” Romans 10:2

“...they did not pursue [righteousness] by faith, but as if it were based on works...” Romans 9:32

Was it God who acted unjustly? Was it God who did wrong? Is God to blame for Israel's rejection of the Christ? To all of these, the answer is no. In light of this, some might reason that God had every right to reject His people. Why would He remember His covenant with them? So, **has God rejected Israel?**

Once again, we read the emphatic retort in **verse 1, By no means!** Far be it from God to reject His people! Absolutely not! Never! This is written in the strongest negative sense in the Greek language. He used the same retort to answer the question, "*Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?*" *Romans 6:1* The idea that God has rejected His people is as ridiculous as the thought that we should continue in sin that grace may abound.

CASE IN POINT

Far be it from God to reject them; to change His mind. Far be it from God to turn His back on His people. **Verses 1 and 2** continue, **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.** Salvation came first to the Jews and then it went to the Gentiles. (*Romans 1:16*) It did not go to the Gentiles at the expense of the Jews. Paul was once an unbelieving, even hostile, Jew.

I noted to my kids this week in family worship that Acts was written by Luke, who was a missionary partner with Paul. In *Acts 8:1* it says, "*And Saul approved of [Stephen's] execution.*" I think Paul encouraged Luke to include that statement. It serves as public record that Paul, also known as Saul, was not only opposed the gospel, he was also a violent persecutor of Christ's Church.

He was exactly the type of person he has been describing in *Romans 9* and *10*: self-righteous, disobedient, and contrary. He was an Israelite. Notice, too, that he used the present-tense **I am an Israelite.** He did not cease to be an Israelite when he was saved.

The Jews are not excluded, despite their rejection of the Christ. They've rejected the gospel. They've rejected the Messiah. But any of them could at any time believe and call upon the name of Christ and be saved. Same today as then. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (cf. *10:13*) Paul is case in point! He was the epitome of an Israelite and God chose him for salvation.

FOREKNOWLEDGE IS INTIMATE AND EFFECTUAL

Paul says God has **not rejected His people whom He foreknew.** Those **whom He foreknew** are those whom He elected to salvation from before the foundation of the earth. "*For those whom he 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.*" *Romans 8:28-30*

God's foreknowledge is more than knowing ahead of time. It is intimate and it is effectual because He is personal, and He is sovereign.

Far be it from God to reject His people whom He foreknew. Paul's phrasing mirrors *1 Samuel 12:22*. There we read that for God to reject His people would be an affront to His own great name. **For the Lord will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself.** *1 Samuel 12:22*

Over and over again we read in scripture the assurances to the contrary, "*For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage...*" *Psalms 94:14*

“He remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant...” Psalm 105:8-10

DARK DAYS FOR ISRAEL

Nevertheless, the lingering question remains, which Paul labors to answer in these chapters, “Why do so few Jews believe and call on the name of the Lord?” Paul once again returns to the Old Testament scripture to find the answer in the latter part of **verse 2 and verse 3. 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.**” (1 Kings 19:18)

The prophet Elijah was among God’s people and yet he felt alone. Elijah lived in perhaps one of the worst times of Israel’s apostasy, a time when King Ahab, influenced by his wife Jezebel, allowed pagan priests to practice their idolatry on the high places of Israel. This was a dark time in Israel and Elijah felt that he alone was a man after God’s heart. He alone stood faithful. Everyone else was trying to kill him, like they did the rest of the prophets. Dark days for Elijah. Paul apparently felt that Israel’s apostasy in his day was similar, thus the correlation.

Just before Stephen’s execution in Acts 7, he preached a fiery sermon, saying this to the men of Israel, *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” Acts 7:51-53*

Paul likely heard these words himself considering the fact that people laid their cloaks at his feet before stoning Stephen, yet these words did not penetrate his heart. Remember, we read in Acts 8:1 that he approved of Stephen’s execution. I wonder how much Stephen’s final words impacted Paul’s life once he was saved. Did Paul realize that he, like his fathers, killed the prophets, the messengers of God?

You cannot read the Old Testament without coming to the conclusion that God’s people have always been disobedient and contrary. They’ve always gotten it wrong. You can start with Abram who took matters into his own hands by sleeping with his wife’s servant, Hagar. You can move on to Moses who doubted God and was prevented from entering the promised land, to the golden-calf worshipping people of Israel in the wilderness, to the promise-land dwelling Israelites who whored themselves under every tree in pagan worship and served the demon-god Baal, to the returning exiles under Nehemiah’s reform who hypocritically declared, “we will obey everything written in the law,” to the Pharisees who handed the Son of God over to the Romans, to the crowd of Israelites who called out “crucify Him.” What you will see repeated throughout the scriptures is the unfaithfulness of man and the unceasing mercy of God.

A REMNANT, CHOSEN BY GRACE

So too, at present, Paul was arguing, God’s people have by in large gotten it wrong. So many had failed to respond to God faithfully, just like their fathers. Yet, all hope is not lost. Not for Paul, neither was it for Elijah. When Elijah felt so discouraged and so alone God reminded him, he was not alone and God was still in control. **Verse 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.”**

Elijah felt alone, yet God had sovereignly **kept** for Himself **seven thousand men**. Elijah needed to be reminded that God was still in control, no matter how desperate the circumstances felt. Paul was

reminding the reader the same. God is still in control as **verse 5** says **So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.**

It can be so disheartening to exert the effort in prayer and witnessing and ministering and loving and overlooking offenses and looking for open doors for spiritual conversations only to be shut down time and again; even mocked, harassed, persecuted for it. It can cause us to grow weary, to want to throw up our hands in defeat, to cry out in despair. It can feel like there is no hope and like we are all alone in this dark, dark world. It is easy to come to that place of believing, "I alone am left." Ministry can be so isolating. This is where we need to be brought back to the sovereignty of God.

Paul said **there is a remnant.** Aside from Jesus' first disciples, mostly Jews, the first converts to Christianity were 3000 Jews in Acts 2. By Acts 4 it says their number was 5000 men, presumably all Jews. Some estimate that as many as 20,000 Jews were born-again followers of Jesus by the end of the first century. Yet it was fraction of the total population of the Jews.

This reminds me of what Paul said in Romans 9, *"And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved...'"* Romans 9:27

It may feel like Israel has been rejected by God since so few Jews have believed the gospel, both in Paul's day and in ours. It may feel like God has forsaken them, forgotten them, abandoned them. The rest of chapter 11 begs to differ and points us to the future of Israel, a time Paul describes as their full-inclusion and acceptance of the gospel, a grafting back of their natural olive branches into the olive tree.

A time will come in which the full number of the Gentiles is brought in and then the partial hardening of the Jews will be lifted, and all Israel will be saved. Until then, there is a remnant of Israel **chosen by grace.**

This draws us back to the theme of God's sovereignty in election, introduced in Romans 9. *"Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"* Romans 9:21

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." Romans 9:15-16

Just as God has always chosen to save some by grace, so too at present, there are Jews chosen by grace as a remnant to ensure that from the time of Abram to the time of Jesus' final judgment there will be a faithful remnant in the world, chosen by grace. This remnant will not be preserved because of heritage, *"For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel..."* Romans 9:6

Nor will this remnant be preserved because of their law-keeping. They will be preserved because they have been chosen by grace. What was true of God's people 4000 years ago, 2000 years ago, and today is we are feeble, fickle, weak, and disobedient to God. We are poised to reject Him, find everything and anything else to worship but Him, and disobey Him at every turn. That is the heart of man, and it always has been.

NO GROUNDS FOR BOASTING

The only reason there is a remnant of believing Jews in the world, and believing Gentiles for that matter, whether in Paul's day or in ours, is sheer grace. **Verse 6** **But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.**

Salvation for the Jews is not based on what they do for God. This was, and is, a stumbling stone for them. So many stumbled over the stumbling stone, the rock of offense, Jesus Christ. Remember, *"...they did not pursue [righteousness] by faith, but as if it were based on works..."* Romans 9:32

Jesus is also a stumbling stone for Gentiles. He is a stumbling stone for Muslims. For Buddhists. For Mormons. For Jehovah's Witnesses. For Hebrew Roots. For Catholics. For Methodists. For Pentecostals. For Baptists. For hard-working, salt-of-the-earth, moralistic, law-abiding people everywhere. Jesus, and His salvation by grace, denies us the right to boast. It is humbling, even humiliating. It is degrading of our sense of pride. It is medicine we may not want, but it is medicine we need for our sin-sick hearts!

If salvation is by grace, **it is no longer on the basis of works**. To be clear, **no longer** is not temporal, but logical. Paul is not saying it used to be based on works but now it is no longer. He's saying that what follows logically is that if it is by grace, it is not by works. Why? Because if salvation were based on works, **grace would no longer be grace**. Logically, if salvation were on the basis of works, there would be no grace. Grace, by definition, is undeserved favor. You cannot earn grace. You cannot deserve it. It is receiving what you did not earn. Ironically, the basis of our salvation is the realization and confession that we do not deserve it. The way we are made right with God is by acknowledging we are not right with God.

That is a sober reality because so many want to prove they are good enough to deserve it. But the gospel, rightly understood, that you did nothing to earn it and you can do nothing to lose it, is an affront to man's ego.

It may feel like the days are getting darker and more evil. It may feel like the faithful are fewer and farther between. It may feel like the world and the devil are winning. You may feel discouraged, disheartened, and disillusioned. But take heart, there will always be a remnant, chosen by grace! Kept by God's sovereign hand...preserved by him...preserved for him.

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