
“The Rest Were Hardened”

ROMANS 11:7-10

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AT A GLANCE

What began on Palm Sunday with shouts of celebration and triumph ended with unbelief. Sadly, not much had changed for Israel over the few decades that would follow. In today’s passage in Romans 11, Paul sheds light the unbelief of Israel in his day and in ours.

INTRODUCTION

John 12:12 and following captures the triumphal entry on what we call Palm Sunday. It is called this because a great crowd of people following Jesus laid palm branches and cloaks along the road as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. This fulfilled what was written, “behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.” Triumph. Celebration. Hosanna! – All initially mark this day in the final week of Jesus.

But it was not all cheer and glee when the Son of Man entered that city. Jesus began to rebuke the crowd almost immediately because they were following Him as a spectacle, because He raised Lazarus from the dead. But when He told them He would die, they couldn’t wrap their heads around that.

John narrates the scene, *“Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.’”* John 12:37-40

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⁷What 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.”

WHAT THEN?

⁷What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. God’s righteousness is based on grace but Israel was seeking to establish a righteousness of their own based on works. Thus Israel **failed to obtain what it was seeking.**

Paul continues, **The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened. The elect**, whom Paul referred to as “the remnant chosen by grace” in verse 5, have obtained righteousness with God because it was imputed to them through faith, not works. They were chosen by grace, not because of any virtue or works on their part. Why? Paul says elsewhere, “Lest any should boast.” Where righteousness is based on works, man is the hero, man gets the glory. The elect of God recognize they have **obtained** what they have because of grace, thus God gets the glory.

A HARD SAYING

The elect obtained it, **but the rest were hardened**. This reminds me of Romans 9 where Paul quotes Exodus 33:19, “*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*” Romans 9:15 And a few verses later Paul says, “*So then He has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills.*” Romans 9:18 Remember, O man, not to talk back to God.

Instead, we ought to say with Paul, “*How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!*” Romans 11:33 Whenever we come to a difficult passage, we should recognize it is we who are limited in our understanding, not God, in His justice.

If you recall, the context of Exodus 33 was God hardening Pharaoh’s heart. However, that hardening came after Pharaoh hardened his own heart five times. Likewise, Paul has made the case that Israel hardened their own hearts by seeking to establish their own righteousness, by failing to submit to the righteousness of God, by being disobedient and contrary to God, and by stumbling over the rock of offense – a sterile way of saying they crucified the Son of God.

God hardened them, rendering them even more insensitive to the Holy Spirit and sealing their unbelief, but we read this only after we read of Israel hardening themselves.

TWO WITNESSES

In verse 8 Paul says **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.”** (Isaiah 29:10; Deuteronomy 29:4)

It is hard to deny what Paul is saying here. **God gave them a spirit of stupor**, that is, a mind that fails to understand, perceive, and believe; symbolically illustrated as **eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear**.

Notice, Paul quotes from both Isaiah and Deuteronomy. Isaiah represents the prophets and Deuteronomy represents the Law. Two witnesses, each from the Word of God, each testifying to the truth about Israel’s apostasy.

Interestingly, the actual verse Paul quotes in Deuteronomy says, “But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” Deuteronomy 29:4 Despite seeing all that God had done for them in Egypt and with Pharaoh, the great wonders that their own eyes saw, they lacked hearts to understand and eyes to see and ears to hear. Forty years in the wilderness had gone by and they had witnessed first-hand God’s miraculous provision and protection. Yet, God, speaking through Moses, essentially said to them, “You still don’t get it.”

Paul says **God gave them a spirit of stupor**, a quote from Isaiah 29, “*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).*” Isaiah 29:10

God sent prophet after prophet who called the nation of Israel to repentance and faithfulness, and they killed them for it. Instead, they closed their eyes and covered the ears, both parts of the body used to perceive. They would not see and they would not hear. They rejected the messengers

because they rejected the message. Therefore, God poured out on them a spirit of stupor, or deep sleep, further preventing them from seeing.

WHAT SHOULD THEY HAVE SEEN?

In Luke 10 Jesus helps us understand what they should have seen. Jesus said, *“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”* Luke 10:23-24

Just prior to that, Jesus’s disciples returned from their short-term mission trip the way most of us do – on a spiritual high! Jesus rejoiced with them, not so much that demons submitted to them in His name, which is what had the disciples so pumped, but that their names were written in Heaven.

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Luke 10:21-22

So, what should Israel have seen? Jesus, their Messiah! What should they have heard? The Gospel of their salvation! But to do so, they’d have had to approach the Father like a little child. The elite, the educated, the powerful thought they could establish their own righteousness. In short, they were too good for grace. What a pity.

A SNARE AND A TRAP

Sadly, their judgment was pronounced 1000 years before. **Verses 9-10 And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; ¹⁰let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.”** This is from Psalm 69:22-23, a messianic psalm, a prophetic psalm about the suffering Christ.

In speaking of why the Jews hated Him, Jesus quoted Psalm 69:4, *“But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’”* John 15:25 Not only did they hate Him, Jesus said, but they also hated the Father.

According to Paul, this prophecy, with its resulting judgment, has been fulfilled in the Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah. If we return to the text in Romans, it becomes more clear to us – the elect, chosen by grace, were given the righteousness of God through faith, not works. The rest reaped the due penalty for their hardness of heart – the judgment of Christ forever.

Let’s consider the judgment Paul quotes from Psalm 69. **Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them.** Their table is symbolic of their place of safety, sustenance, and security. It’s a refuge. But David, and here in this context Paul, called for the refuge to become a **snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them.** What a tragic change of fortune.

What Paul meant precisely by **their table**, is unclear. But we know that the Jews considered God’s Word, especially the first five books, called the Torah or the Pentateuch, to be their source of spiritual sustenance and security. The Jews saw the scriptures as their refuge. Here’s what Jesus said, *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life...”* John 5:39 I believe it’s a fair assessment to understand **their table** as the Word of God.

THE WORD OF GOD AS JUDGE

What a shocking thing, then, to hear that the Word of God would become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. We love the Word of God, how could it become a snare and a trap for someone?

Here's how: the more people used scripture inappropriately, as a means of securing their own salvation, the more immune they became to the gospel of salvation. Jesus said, *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."* John 5:39-40

The scriptures point us to Jesus. They reveal to us our need for a Savior, the plan of God for our salvation, and the fulfillment of that plan in Jesus, the Savior.

Listen to the words of Jesus on Palm Sunday, *"If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day."* John 12:47-48

The scriptures rise up in our judgment as a testimony of our response to Him, just as Isaiah and Moses served as witnesses against Israel through Paul. Those who believe the gospel and obey the gospel, the scriptures bear witness that we have eternal life and will be with Jesus forever. Those who refuse to obey the gospel, the scriptures bear witness that they have failed to obtain what they sought.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, appealing to Isaiah 6, saying they had eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, because they refused to receive by faith what had been offered to them. They would not turn to Him for life because they thought in scripture they found their refuge.

A MODERN-DAY WARNING

What a warning to people today who are committed to reading, studying, memorizing, and teaching the Word but do so as a work of righteousness and refuse to acknowledge the One to whom the Word directs us. They know all the verses. They know all the doctrine. They know all the trivia. And there's certainly nothing wrong with knowing the Word! But they sit down to the table of the Word of God, thinking they have security from judgment, thinking that in them they have eternal life.

But it will be the very table of the Word that ensnares them, entraps them, trips them, and condemns them because they resist the message of redemption by grace, through faith, in Christ.

Hear the sober words of Hebrews 3, *"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.' For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief."* Hebrews 3:12-19

Do you want to enter the kingdom of heaven? Enter by belief! Do you already believe the gospel? Rejoice, because you have been blessed! *"...Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!"* Luke 10:23

Palm Sunday was a day of tragic irony. Many people thronged to Jesus to be near the spectacle. But they would not believe His Word. What began with "Hosanna!" on Sunday ended with "Crucify Him" on Friday. Hardened hearts, blinded eyes, and deaf ears. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the day of rebellion.

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