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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #45

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A Remnant, Chosen by Grace

Romans 11:1-10

I want to ask all of you a question today, but I don't expect you to shout out your answer. Here it is. What single event in the last 75 years has had the greatest impact on the Christian church? The impact doesn't have to be a good one. It may be, but it might also be damaging.

Many of you would immediately point to the damaging impact of the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, when abortion was made legal in our country. Others would also point to the Supreme Court and its decision in 2015 in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. This, of course, is what made so-called same-sex marriage legal in our land. Some of you might point instead to the many scandals that rocked the evangelical world in the late 1980's when a handful of prominent TV evangelists were caught in sexual and financial sin. I imagine a few of you would cite one or perhaps two particular presidential elections as having had either a positive or negative impact on the church. Those with a very short memory would likely point to the Covid-19 pandemic.

But I want to take you back a bit farther in time to 1948. It was then that the modern state of Israel was formally established. This monumental occurrence caused considerable political and military upheaval that continues into the present day. But more important still, at least as far as the Christian church is concerned, is that this event raised once again the question of the role of the Jewish people in God's plan for the ages.

Many today, in fact, I would go so far as to say the majority of evangelical Christians are convinced that the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 was in fulfillment of biblical prophecy and that it could very well be a sign that the second coming of Jesus is just around the corner. One related development was an attempt to pinpoint the timing of the rapture of the church. Based on what I believe is a misinterpretation of Matthew 24:34, some argued that the return of Christ would occur precisely 40 years after Israel was established. Numerous books and pamphlets were published with the prediction that in 1988 Jesus would appear in the clouds of heaven. Needless to say, this never happened.

The political implications of what happened in 1948 are also of some significance. Many contend that if the United States of America (or any other country, for that matter) itself hopes to survive and thrive, it must support, protect, and defend the state of Israel no matter the cost.

The reasoning behind this perspective is probably familiar to most of you. We know that God made a covenant with Abraham and his posterity (Genesis 12, 15, 17) in which he gave to them the land of

Canaan. Moreover, God said he would bless those who bless the Abrahamic line and curse those who curse them. To obtain God's blessing, therefore, one must support Israel.

There are some, perhaps even many, who believe we should support and protect Israel on historical, political, and military grounds. Israel is our ally and promotes freedom. It has the right to exist, no less so than any other country, be it the U.S.A. or Canada or France or Russia. But just as many, perhaps even more, argue that Israel's right to exist and live in the land is based on the Abrahamic covenant. On this view, Israel not only has a historical, political, and military right to exist in the land but also a biblical and theological right.

Most of you will remember the name of Jerry Falwell, who is perhaps most famous for the establishment of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. In an interview in 1983 he spoke for many Christians when he said this:

“God deals with nations in relation to how nations deal with Israel. I believe God blesses America and has blessed America because we have blessed Abraham and have blessed the Jews. I think if America . . . turned against Israel, our value to God would cease to be. We are important to God only if we are meeting God's priorities on this earth” (*Tyler Courier-Times Sunday Telegraph*, Vol. 105, 136, 2/6/83).

Now, how is that for a controversial statement! I will resist the temptation to respond to it and draw our attention to Romans 11.

Is the modern state of Israel a fulfillment of biblical prophecy? Should we expect a major spiritual revival among the Jewish people in which they will come to saving faith in Jesus? If so, when will this occur? No chapter in the Bible speaks to this issue more directly than Romans 11.

Romans 11 in Context

If we are to understand Paul's argument in Romans 11, we must first address the problem he raised in Romans 9:1-5. You will remember that Paul articulated quite clearly the many blessings that God gave to Israel when he established his covenant with her. He mentions how Israel was adopted as a nation to be God's "son." He mentions the covenants established with her, the giving of the Law of Moses, the Levitical sacrifices, the patriarchs, and perhaps the greatest blessing and honor of all is that from Israel descended the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The problem, however, is that few in Israel in Paul's day had believed in Jesus. Most had rejected him and were living and dying in unbelief. Does this mean God's promises to Israel failed to come to pass? Has his word or promise to Israel come to nothing? This question is of profound practical importance for all of us. If God's promises to Israel have failed, how can we trust his promises to us?

I trust you remember how Paul answered this troublesome question. He said in Romans 9:6, “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” In other words, God’s purpose has always been to save the elect remnant within the nation of Israel. He never promised to save every physical descendant of Abraham. This is the point of Romans 9:6. Not every person who is an Israelite by virtue of physical descent is a true, spiritual, elect Israelite. There is an “Israel” inside of “Israel.” There is a spiritually elect remnant within the physically ethnic nation.

Paul proceeds to prove his point by appealing first to the family of Abraham (Romans 9:7-9). Although both Isaac and Ishmael are Abraham’s physical seed/descendants, God determined that the promised inheritance would come only through Isaac. He then turns to the family of Isaac (Romans 9:10-13) and points out that although both Jacob and Esau are Isaac’s physical seed (indeed, they were twins), God saved only Jacob. The fact that Ishmael and Esau were not saved does not prove that God is unfaithful. God never promised to save all Jews, but only the elect remnant. We saw this again in Romans 9:27-29,

(27) 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, (28) for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” (29) And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah” (Rom. 9:27-29).

Paul addressed this problem once again in Romans 10. Maybe the reason the majority didn’t believe in Jesus is that they never heard the gospel? No, says Paul. They did hear it. Well, perhaps then they didn’t believe because although they heard it, they didn’t understand it. No, says Paul. They did understand it.

This once again raises the question of God’s commitment to his covenant promise. It seems to suggest that he has abandoned or rejected the people whom he foreknew. Such widespread unbelief among ethnic Israelites seems to say that God has withdrawn his covenant promise, has reneged on his word, has forsaken his beloved, and has rejected the people whom he foreknew. Romans 11 is Paul’s answer to this charge, and he responds with a resounding, No!

How and When will God Save his Foreknown People?

Paul will make it clear right from the start of chapter eleven that God has most assuredly not rejected his people. You can see that in v. 1. But the question that demands to be answered is this: How and When will God fulfill his promises and save his people? Many contend that Romans 11 teaches us that God will in fact one day save all, or at least the vast majority, of Jewish people who are alive on earth. And he will do this at the end of the age in conjunction with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Others insist that God is going to save the elect in Israel progressively, down through history, in the same way he saves elect Gentiles.

In other words, as individual Gentiles, like you and me, come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are saved; we become members of the Church, the body of Christ. The same is true of individual Jewish men and women. When they come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, they too will be saved. But it won’t be in one

huge, mass ingathering of souls at the end of history. It will occur repeatedly, progressively, incrementally through the many centuries that span the gap between Christ's first coming and his second coming.

That is the most pressing question that Paul answers in Romans 11. My appeal to everyone is that you not divide or separate from or get angry at others who might take a different position from you. The most important truth is that God is still saving Jewish men and women. Whether he does it primarily in incremental stages through the course of these past 2,000 plus years, or in mass at the time of Christ's return, is of secondary importance.

The reason why there should be no division or anger over which view one embraces is because in the final analysis they both say the same thing. What do they say? Simply this: all God's elect within ethnic Israel will be saved. Whether or not they will be saved is not the issue. Both views agree that the answer is Yes, they will be saved. The debate is over how and when. Will it happen gradually, over time, throughout the course of what we call church history? Or will it occur in mass, in one final all-encompassing revival among Jews who live at the time of Christ's return? Or could it be that both are true? This is something we will explore in detail as we work our way through Romans 11.

The Elect Remnant within Israel (vv. 1-6)

Paul's purpose in vv. 1-6 is to establish and defend the truth of the remnant. It is the remnant that explains why there can be widespread unbelief in Israel and it pose no threat to God's faithfulness to his promises. He cites two examples to make his point: himself and Elijah. In case you hadn't figured it out by now, the word "remnant" simply refers to a small part of a much greater whole.

The Example of Paul (v. 1)

Paul's question at the beginning of v. 1 is precise and pointed: "has God rejected his people?" His answer is no less precise and pointed, and even a bit passionate: "By no means. Not on your life. Absolutely not. God forbid!" But merely asserting that God has not rejected his people is one thing. What proof does Paul provide to support his response? The answer is: himself!

How can it be said that God has forever cast aside the Jewish people when Paul, a Jew, is himself saved? He makes it clear: "I myself am an Israelite. I descended from Abraham. Not only that, but I'm a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ***If God had forsaken his people in Israel, how do you explain my salvation?*** If God had forever rejected his people, I wouldn't be saved."

Clearly, then, Paul is himself a personal, living example of the elect, believing remnant within the nation as a whole. He is both an ethnic and elect Israelite. Once again, God never foreknew or foreloved in saving grace all the physical descendants of Abraham, but only a remnant, of which Paul is a current, living constituent member.

Before we leave v. 1, I need to point out something of great importance. Many read v. 1 and Paul's declaration that God has not cast off his people as if it is a promise that one day in the future, in conjunction with the return of Christ, God will save in mass those Israelites who are alive on the earth. But that isn't what Paul is saying. It is God's saving work in the present day, that is, in Paul's day in the first century, that serves to refute the notion that God has ceased to save Jews. Whether or not God intends to save the majority of Jewish people at the end of history is still a question to be answered. But that isn't what Paul is saying in v. 1.

You will notice in v. 5 that Paul confirms his point when he says, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." He doesn't say that because I am a Jew and I am saved that in the future there will be a mass revival among the Jewish people. That may well happen, but that isn't Paul's point here. His proof of the reality of the remnant is himself, a man living in the first century.

The Example of Elijah (vv. 2-6)

But Paul doesn't stop with himself. He wants to demonstrate that the remnant principle has been God's way of dealing with people all throughout biblical history. So he appeals to the case of Elijah. Just as Paul is himself one example of the remnant principle, so too is Elijah.

Let's begin by briefly revisiting the story of Elijah as described in 1 Kings 18:20-19:18. Elijah had challenged the people of Israel to make up their minds: "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). But no one responded to his challenge. This is the point at which Elijah, obviously quite frustrated, cried out: "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men" (1 Kings 18:22).

Elijah then proposed a test. The prophets of Baal were to cut a bull in pieces and place it on the altar. They were to cry out to their god, Baal, to send fire to consume the pieces on the altar. Elijah would do the same, but he would cry out to Yahweh. The prophets of Baal cried out from morning to noon, but nothing happened. "And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened'" (1 Kings 18:26b-27). The prophets of Baal proceeded to cut themselves with sword and lances, but nothing happened.

Elijah took the pieces of the bull and placed them on an altar he built for the Lord. He instructed the people to pour water on the offering, three times. Then, to prove he alone is God, Yahweh sent fire on the altar and it not only consumed the bull and the wood but "licked up the water that was in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38).

Elijah and the people of God proceeded to slaughter the prophets of Baal. When Ahab told Jezebel what Elijah had done, she threatened Elijah with death. Depressed and fearful, he ran away. When confronted by God he twice declared, "I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10). God's response was clear and to the point: "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:18).

The number 7 in Scripture often signifies wholeness, completeness, or perfection. It may well be that there were 7,000 men but an even greater number of women and children as well. Notice how they are described. God says, "I have kept *for myself* seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (Rom. 11:4). The preservation of these 7,000 was not due to anything Elijah had done or even anything that they had done. It was God's gracious and sovereign will that preserved for himself these 7,000 and more. And by preserving or keeping them God isn't saying that he kept them alive but that he saw to it that they remained faithful to him. God "kept" them in the sense that he upheld them in their faith.

The application of this is found in v. 5. The principle by which God accomplishes his purpose in Paul's day is no different from the way in which he operated in Elijah's day. Just as in the days of Elijah, so too in the days of Paul, God's true people, the elect remnant, are saved in spite of widespread unbelief. And on what basis are they saved? He tells us in v. 6. It is "by grace." And since it is by grace it cannot be by works.

At the close of v. 5 he says it is "according to the election of grace." The only reason there is a saved, believing remnant is because of God's merciful and gracious initiative. It is not human willing or choosing or working that explains the existence of the remnant. It is only because of God's sovereign and gracious choice.

God didn't save the remnant, whoever they may be, because he saw in them something that was absent from everyone else. It wasn't some spark of inherent goodness or a decision on their part to obey. It was all of divine grace. If grace is conditioned on or in any way governed by human action or human willing, it ceases to be grace. Thus, if there is a saved remnant, it is because God willed it, not because men or women willed it.

Israel's Unbelief Once More (vv. 7-10)

What was Israel seeking, and why did they not find it? They were seeking for a right standing with God. They were committed to the pursuit of a righteousness that would avail in God's presence and secure for them a relationship with him. We saw this earlier in Romans 9:30-32 and 10:2-3 where Paul spoke of Israel pursuing a righteousness based on obedience to the law. They sought to establish their own righteousness by works rather than trusting in God's provision of righteousness through faith alone.

It isn't any different for you and me today. If you are seeking after a righteous standing with God, know this well: if you think you can obtain it by your own religious devotion and zeal and obedience to some moral code, you are going to be disappointed, eternally disappointed. ***The only righteousness that avails with God is the righteousness that God himself provides us when we put our faith in Jesus.***

Although the majority of those in Israel failed to find an acceptable standing with God, the elect did (v. 7). Those who refused to submit to God's ordained path for salvation were judged. They, "the rest," were "hardened" (v. 7b).

Don't be misled by this. Paul isn't saying that the majority in Israel wanted salvation on God's terms but the Lord turned them down and hardened their hearts. People object to the doctrine of unconditional election because they think God hardens innocent and good people who want to be saved, but God won't let them. No. Their hearts were already resistant to God's ordained means of obtaining righteousness. God did not harden innocent people. He hardened those who by their own defiance and attempt to gain righteousness by means of their own works of obedience had spurned God's offer of life by faith.

Those who were chosen, the elect, deserved to be hardened just as much as those who were. Isaac was no better than Ishmael, yet God chose him. Why? Because he wanted to. Jacob was no better than Esau, yet God chose him. Why? Because he wanted to. Elijah was no better than Ahab, yet God chose him. Why? Because God wanted to. Paul was no better than Judas, yet God chose him. Why? Because he wanted to. You, dear Christian friend, are no better than countless people who die in unbelief, yet God chose you. Why? Because he wanted to.

I know what you're thinking. You are saying to yourself, "But I want to know *why* God wanted to. I want to know why he chose some and not all. I want to know his reasons. Only then will I be able to rest easy with this doctrine of election."

But you and I need to understand something. And it is that *we don't need to understand everything*. It is for our own good that God has chosen not to reveal certain things to us. You may recall what Moses said in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever." I don't mean this to sound harsh, but there are some things that are simply none of our business. And one of these "things" is the reason or basis for God's sovereign choice in salvation. We must be careful that we do not let our unanswered questions pass over into accusations, as if the reason why God doesn't give us answers is because he has done something unjust or unfair.

Let the reality of God's sovereign grace have its full impact on your heart. Be humbled. Be stunned. Be overwhelmed in knowing that although you were spiritually blind and dead and hated God that he chose to bring you to spiritual life and awaken you to the beauty and splendor of his Son dying in your place. Be humbled. Be stunned. Be overwhelmed in knowing that when you stand before God on the final day, accepted in the Beloved, you are there by grace alone. It isn't because you were wiser or more frugal or more diligent or more spiritually sensitive. The only thing you will find strength to say on that day is, "Thank you, Lord, for your grace."

What kind of church would Bridgeway be if all of us knew deep down in our hearts that we deserved only eternal death but by God's grace have been given eternal life? Would we not be able to endure without complaining every trial and hardship and be amazed and grateful for every pleasure and gift?

Note well that Paul doesn't stop with the assertion in v. 7 that "the rest were hardened." He proceeds to appeal to the OT for confirmation. He first cites Deuteronomy 29:4 and then Psalm 69:22-23.

Both of these texts say much the same thing. When a person persists in refusing to recognize the beauty of what God has done in Christ, judgment comes in the form of even greater spiritual blindness. The

hardening by God aggravates even more intensely the hardened heart. Again, don't ever think that the people who are in view in vv. 8-10 are spiritually awake and that God puts them to sleep. Don't ever think that they want to see and know and hear and understand but God prohibits them from doing so. No. They are entrenched in their unbelief and darkness and in altogether justified judgment, God intensifies their chosen path.

Romans 10:9 is difficult to interpret, but I think what he means by "their table" is all the good things, the blessings, the physical pleasures they enjoy, the abundant food and drink that God has provided. "These good things, given by God, become a stumbling block and a trap. I assume that means that they fall in love with these things. The pleasure that they get in things replaces the pleasure they should have in God. And so their physical appetites—for food or sex or aesthetic pleasure—deaden their spiritual appetites and they lose all desire for God" (John Piper).

But what does it mean when God is said to "bend their backs forever"? In what way is this his judgment of them for their spiritual rebellion and idolatry? The idea is probably a picture of someone carrying such a heavy load or burden that they are bent over double, straining under the weight. The irony of it all is that unbelievers think of themselves as burden free, as carefree and able to do all that their moral code demands of them. But God sees them as so burdened and weighed down that their religious efforts serve only to crush them beneath the weight of demands they cannot hope to fulfill.

Before we leave this description of God's righteous judgment, note in v. 8 that this is something that has been going on for a long time, indeed "down to this very day." Moses spoke these words over 1,400 years before Paul ever wrote Romans. And what was true of those who did not know God back then is still true today. The hardening remains.

I know I'm beginning to sound like a broken record, but please indulge me one more time. Those who are chosen, the elect, are not chosen because they are better than those whom God passed over. And those whom he passed over, the non-elect, were not passed over because they were worse than those whom God chose. God didn't make this decision because of anything in anyone, but solely because of his sovereign good pleasure.

John Piper has summed it up well, and with his words I conclude:

"When [God] draws us to himself and opens our eyes so that we believe in him and trust him and love him and treasure him, it is owing to nothing in us, and we should be the humblest, most patient, kind, loving, tenderhearted, forgiving, courageous people on the earth. God has made us his own, and it was grace and grace alone that did it. And when he passes over others and leaves them to become hard and rebellious and unbelieving, he does them no injustice. We are as deserving of judgment as they. And it is sheer, undeserved grace that we stand justified in faith."