

Rom 11:1-12 Chosen by Grace

Chapter 10 ended with such a sad statement, “But of Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.’” In His goodness and mercy, God has offered His salvation to the covenant people, yet they have rejected Him. How does God respond to that rejection? That’s the subject of ch. 11, which starts with a question, just like so much of ch. 10.

“I ask then, has God rejected his people?” If God was like us, He would say something like, “if that’s the way you want it, then fine. I’m done with you!” Thankfully God isn’t like us, though. He is faithful. Remember that He made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were unconditional – they didn’t require specific obedience for their fulfillment. Israel was God’s chosen people, and He would continue working through them. Paul answers his own question, “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.”

Think about the implications of what Paul says here. After the unfaithfulness of Israel in the time of the prophets, they were dispersed among the gentiles and their nation was destroyed, just as God had foretold when He gave them the Law. By three examples, Paul proves his point that God has not rejected His people. The first is that Paul himself, hundreds of years later, was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin who knew and worshiped the God of Abraham. Even more, Paul himself had been a persecutor, an enemy of the faith, yet God did not reject him, but allowed him to repent and be saved. He was appealing to his own salvation as proof that God has not completely abandoned Israel. Secondly, the renewed existence of Israel in the promised land was proof that God was still faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs. God had promised to bring them back from their dispersion, and He did. Third, he uses the example of Elijah. Apostasy had been present many times in Israel, and the northern kingdom of Elijah’s day had grossly violated the covenant relationship with God. Elijah knew they were deserving of judgment, but what did God tell him? “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.’” Even in the northern kingdom of Israel, God had preserved a remnant of believers. Paul continues: “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.”

Though the people of Israel, as a nation, have rejected God’s salvation, there is still a remnant who have exercised saving faith, and God knows who they are, just as He did in Elijah’s day. Those Israelites are chosen by grace, just as anyone else. What is grace? Unmerited favor, the blessing of God’s forgiveness when you deserve His wrath. Scripture says “the soul that sins shall die” and “the wages of sin is death,” yet God, in His grace, offers forgiveness to all who call on His name in faith – whether Jew or Gentile.

Another question is raised, “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.’” What was Israel seeking? We saw in chapters 9-10 that they were seeking righteousness, but they sought it by the works of the law, by living righteous lives rather than receiving it by grace through faith. When it says they were hardened (or blinded, KJV) in v. 7, the word means to

render insensitive. That was God's penalty for their refusal to heed His Word. They hardened themselves, not wanting to hear His Word, so He rendered them numb to the Word of Truth. This is the process we've already seen in Romans, and is consistent with the rest of scripture – God hardens people in response to their rejection of Him. But even when that happens, does that mean there is no hope?

Then in v. 11-12, Paul again asks if that means God has given up completely, consigning the Jews to eternal condemnation. "So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" God brought a good thing out of an evil one – in His providential love and mercy, God took the blessing that was offered to and rejected by Israel, and gave it to the outcast Gentiles, and then intended to use that to make Israel jealous, so they would receive salvation, too. Paul hints at the future restoration of Israel here. His heart's desire was for his own people, Israel, to come to faith in Christ.

What does all this mean for us? We should be infused with hope – both for the individuals who we know and love who have rejected salvation through Christ, as well as for the people of Israel, God's chosen people. In both cases, the grace of God is still available. No matter how hardened they might seem, God can restore them. We see how God is able to use hard times, evil things, to accomplish His good purposes, giving grace to those who don't deserve it. He will even use something like jealousy to bring people back to faith. He is faithful to His Word, and "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Rom 10:13)