

HAS GOD ABANDONED HIS PEOPLE?

SERIES: THE MYSTERY OF THE JEWS



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Romans 11:1-16
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Brian Morgan
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Romans 11 begins with the question: "God has not rejected His people, has He?" Remember in Romans 10, Paul had revealed that the nation Israel had rejected Jesus as the Messiah not because of ignorance, but because of a moral issue. God had done his part in sending preachers to spread his message. The preachers had made the gospel clear. But, as Isaiah writes, the Heavenly Father was reaching out his hands to a disobedient and obstinate people who were practicing a new form of idolatry involving power, wealth, and self-righteousness.

Thus, the question is raised: Now that they have rejected him, will God in turn reject them as his people? Many Christians have thought so. This idea took form early in church history, had a profound impact in the Middle Ages, and continues in our modern era. The belief that the church is now basically a Gentile organization has resulted in either ignoring the Jews or attacking them as "Christ-killers." Thus, the Jews in their wanderings throughout the world have been buffeted, hounded and persecuted, even by the church.

Of course, the worst expression of this anti-Semitism was the Holocaust. I had a heart-wrenching experience in January when the pastors visited Yad Vashem, the memorial to the Holocaust in Jerusalem. Upon entering the museum, you are confronted with the arrogant testimony of the Nazi regime in an extract from a speech by Himmler to the SS commanders on the mass murder of the Jews. The plaque reads:

It is desirable to talk about this openly among ourselves, but...we shall not refer to this matter in public. As regards clearing out the Jews and exterminating the Jewish race, these things are easy to talk about. The Jewish race is in the process of being exterminated...we are doing it, we are exterminating them:...This thing is a splendid page in our history which we will never write and which never

shall be written.

How ironic!

Beyond that plaque was a display of many of the yellow Stars of David which the Jews had to wear to identify themselves. Around the corner was the Hall of Names filled with microfilms containing the names of the victims. Many Jews were looking up relatives who had perished in the concentration camps. The emotional intensity in that room was extremely high. Occasionally, a quiet sobbing could be heard. Upstairs was an art museum filled with paintings and drawings that were done by the victims in the secret hope that their experiences would be remembered. I stood planted in front of a large painting which depicted grotesque, pale skeletons heaped on a wheelbarrow ready for the refuse heap.

I must say the most powerful impression was made by the memorial for the children. This building resembled a tomb. After descending a concrete pathway and turning the corner, we came upon a bronze plaque of a beautiful four-year-old boy named Uziel Spiegel who perished in Auschwitz in 1944. In the foyer were large pictures of other children to remind us of all who had died. From there, we entered total blackness—corridors with nothing but candles from floor to ceiling and mirrors in front and back to multiply the effect. All these stars of light represented the children. I was reminded of what God said to Abraham: "*As the stars of the night, so shall your seed be.*" But I also thought of these children whose lives were cut short. Who would vindicate them?

I know many Jews forsook their faith because of the Holocaust. Where was their God? The question of whether or not God has abandoned his people is important. All of history demands an answer, and Paul responds with an emphatic "No!" God has not abandoned his people. The apostle begins by using his own life as an illustration of God's loyal-love. Look at verses 1 and 2.

I. PAUL IS AN EXAMPLE OF GOD'S LOYAL LOVE 11:1-2

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.

The thought that God would cast away his people strikes the apostle with horror. He too was an Israelite of the seed of Abraham and of the tribe of Benjamin. I think he is alluding to 1 Samuel 12:22 which reads: "For the Lord will *not abandon* His people on account of His great name, because the Lord has been pleased to make you a people for Himself." This text was Samuel's word to the nation when they asked for a king to rule over them like all the other nations. God gave them a Saul from the tribe of Benjamin but told Samuel that their request was a rejection of his lordship over them. Even though they were rejecting him, God promised to not reject them because he foreknew them and loved them. Instead of abandoning them, he gave them a king.

One thousand years later, the nation Israel rejected the Messiah, and another Saul from the tribe of Benjamin appeared on the scene. This time he was an apostle. Paul saw himself as an example of God's loyal-love in the face of the rejection of the nation. He was the means by which more Jews would come to Christ through the conversion of the Gentiles.

The first century Saul was just like the Old Testament Saul. He rejected the word of God when it first came. In fact, he led the first Christian persecution. At his hands, the first martyr, Stephen, was killed. If anyone ought to have been rejected and abandoned by God it was the apostle Paul! But God saved him. Paul is an example of one saved by grace. He was not only an example, he was the means through which other Jews would be converted.

If this is true, what is God doing

with Israel in the present age? In the rest of the text, Paul opens our eyes to the mysterious ways and purposes of God—how he acts out his loyal-love in history. Because of our ignorance of this material, the church has used programs and methods contrary to the way God works. We expect God to be committed to our ideas and go out on limbs only to find them cut off from beneath us. When they get cut off, God's name is slandered. We do not understand what God is doing. In this text, Paul begins by sharing a text from Elijah's day. Look at verses 2 through 6.

II. AT THE PRESENT TIME GOD IS SAVING A REMNANT 11:2-6

Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, they have torn down Thine altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

Paul says God has not abandoned his people because at the present time he is saving a remnant as he did during the days of Elijah. He asks the Gentile Christians in Rome, "Haven't you heard about Elijah?"

Elijah's story is recorded in 1 Kings 18 and 19. During his time, King Ahab married Jezebel, a prophetess/priest of the cult of Baal. This was like making Hugh Hefner the Pope! When she married the king, Baal worship became the state religion. This idolatry involved a worship which was nothing more than a sexual orgy attempting to stimulate the gods to have sex in heaven in a vain effort to bring rain for the crops.

But God raised up Elijah to confront this wickedness on Mount Carmel. There Elijah summoned the 450 prophets of Baal and challenged them, "Since you say Baal is the god of fertility who brings the rain and the lightning, make a sacrifice and call on him to send fire out of heaven to consume it. I will call upon God to do the same. Then we will see who the real God is!" The Baal priests prayed and tortured themselves all day long as Elijah taunted them, but nothing happened. Then Elijah doused his sacrifice in water and called upon his God. He consumed

the sacrifice in flames immediately.

The power of God had not been seen like this since the days of the exodus when God destroyed Pharaoh through signs, wonders and miracles. In the next scene, when Elijah killed the prophets, he thought the nation would enter into an immediate revival in response to God's display. But Jezebel heard about what Elijah had done and sought to kill him.

In abject fear, Elijah ran the length of the nation until he ended up at Mount Horeb where God had given the ten commandments to Moses. In fact, he stayed in the cave where God demonstrated his glory to Moses. There he sat in discouragement and depression. Then God said, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Elijah answered, "I have been zealous for you. But the sons of Israel have forsaken your covenant and torn down your altars. I alone am left and they seek my life. God, your program is finished. When I am gone, it is over!"

Finally, God answered, "Go outside and stand on the mountain." There a wind blew which was strong enough to break the rocks, but God was not in the wind. Then an earthquake shook the ground, but God was not in the earthquake. A fire broke out, but God was not in the fire. Finally, a gentle blowing came. This word literally means a sound or voice so small it is almost inarticulate. In that manner, God said, "What are you doing here, Elijah? I have work for you to do. Those whom you will anoint will work with power like the strong wind, the earthquake and the fire. But they will have little effect compared to the 7,000 I have left in Israel—all the knees which have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him."

What was the theology lesson behind this event? Why does Paul quote from this story? When God demonstrated his power in the wind, fire and earthquake, it was reminiscent of when he gave the law at Mt. Sinai. Yet with all that power and judgment, the people of God were at the bottom of the hill, dancing about in idol worship. God's demonstration did not change the heart of his people. This was what Elijah experienced when he confronted the prophets of Baal with power and judgment. Not one life was changed! God said, "I can still work in mighty power, but there is another way in which I work—in the still, small voice. That is

the remnant. Elijah, you can't see them or hear them, but there are 7,000 left."

That number is significant. The number 1,000 reflects fulness. Seven is the number of perfection. This quiet remnant which could not be seen was accomplishing God's purposes of salvation in history with total perfection.

In quoting this text, Paul draws parallels with the present situation. Look at verses 5 and 6:

In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Paul says a remnant still exists, but it differs from the concept of Jewish theology. During Paul's day, there were many writing about the remnant in Israel, especially around the Dead Sea area where the Qumran community existed. They believed this tiny group who had survived the judgment was the remnant. They thought the covenant of Torah, race and works were operating in them. One of their writings says, "Lord, are there few who will be saved?...Yes, even fewer than you think."

This is not Paul's view, nor is it the view of Isaiah or Elijah. Paul says the remnant is not based upon works but upon God's choice. It is not based upon race, but upon grace. Secondly, the idea of a remnant is not that of merely a tiny minority and when they die the whole program dies. No, the remnant having returned, is the hope for the future. They reflect that God will do a bright new thing in salvation history. In this case the remnant gave birth to the church, and holds the promise for the "fulness" of Israel to be saved.

In summary, Paul says God has not abandoned his people. Even Paul is an example of this. He is also the means by which God will reach his people. And he says that, as in the days of Elijah, God is saving a remnant by grace, and they are working out God's program silently and perfectly.

Paul goes on to say that in the present age, not only is there a remnant there is another Israel. Look at verses 7 through 10.

III. THERE IS A DOUBLE

DEFINITION OF ISRAEL 11:7-10

What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; just as it is written,

**"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
Eyes to see not and ears to hear not,
Down to this very day."**

And David says,

"Let their table become a snare and a trap,

And a stumbling block and a retribution to them.

**Let their eyes be darkened to see not,
And bend their backs forever."**

There are two Israels—the remnant saved by grace and the rest who have been hardened. Why were they hardened? Paul quotes from Deuteronomy and Psalm 69 which have the common theme that God's word and grace were rejected when they came.

Hardening is God's merciful response to the people when they reject his word. The phrase "*spirit of stupor*" literally refers to a pricking or stinging which resulted in numbness. When a dentist wants to work in someone's mouth, he pricks his patient with a needle filled with novocain to numb the area. This procedure buys him time to work. The same is true for God. Hardening is an act by which he buys time. Thus, he postpones his wrath to allow time for people to repent. Remember the hardening of Pharaoh allowed Israel to be saved. Therefore, when the word of God is preached and rejected, instead of him immediately bringing judgment as we and Elijah would want him to do, he hardens people. Then when the judgment comes, it is clear beyond any doubt that those who have been hardened actually chose that judgment for themselves.

God is faithful. He has not abandoned his people. He is presently saving a remnant. The rest have been hardened as a consequence of their unbelief.

The most important question comes in verse 11: The Jews did not stumble so as to fall, did they? Paul is now talking about the rest, not the remnant. Did their stumbling lead to such a fall that God is no longer concerned about them? Is theirs a permanent and irrevocable hardening? Paul says, "May it never be!"

We need to understand what Paul was

facing when he wrote this material. When he considered the known world of the Mediterranean, he saw Jews in everywhere—Rome, Gaul, Spain, and even possibly Britain. The Jewish historian Josephus boasted that every part of the known world had a Jewish synagogue or congregation. But Paul was facing a church that was inclined to say that Christianity was basically a Gentile organization. They thought they could ignore the Jews because God was not concerned about them. Paul says that this is incorrect. Look at verse 11 and following.

IV. GOD IS STILL CONCERNED ABOUT THE REST 11:11-16

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow-countrymen [flesh] and save some of them. For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? And if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too.

While studying this passage, I realized that there is a continuity between the language here and that in chapter 5. Remember in chapter 5 Paul wrote about Adam and his transgression. When the law came, the transgression increased. Where it increased, grace abounded all the more. He also talked about the life of Christ and how his death reconciled us to God. Then he said, "Much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved by his (resurrection) life."

I think Paul is saying that in the flesh Israel could not be affirmed when Jesus came. In other words, it filled out all the transgressions of Adam, the ultimate transgression being the rejection of the Messiah. But in rejecting the Messiah, they made grace possible. Salvation came to the entire world because of their rejection. Think of what might have happened

if they had welcomed Christ. There would have been no cross, no forgiveness of sin, and no reconciliation! In their transgression in the flesh, they filled out Adam's transgression and then were judged.

Paul says if their transgression brought riches to the world, how could God throw them away? Will he not be concerned about these people? Thus, he says, if their rejection became the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but resurrection life? God still has their acceptance in mind, but he will do it by having the gospel go to the Gentiles first. Then the Jews will become jealous and return to him. This is resurrection life! When the fulness of these Jews enters through jealousy, the ultimate resurrection in history and the birth of the new age will occur.

The parable of the prodigal son clarifies this for us. Paul says we Gentiles are like the younger brother who squandered his inheritance. When we return home, our Father throws a party for us and kills the fatted calf. Although we are welcomed by grace and know we do not deserve it, the older brother remains in the field because he is angry. The party is really intended for him and is not complete until he returns; hopefully, he will return due to jealousy.

This is Paul's point. God is still concerned about the Jews. But his method for saving them is making them jealous by showing mercy to us. Thus, they have brought present blessings to us and still have a future hope. The hardening of their hearts is not forever, nor is it irrevocable.

The guarantee of all of this is the first fruit offering. In verse 16, Paul says, "If the first piece of dough be holy, so is the lump. If the root be holy, the branches are too." In the Old Testament, offering the first piece of dough to the Lord sanctified the entire lump. In a sense, Jesus, as a Jew, was the first fruit of the resurrection. Then came the apostles and the believing remnant. They are not a sign that God is just concerned with a tiny group. They are a sign that God wants to save the entire nation and wants to bring many more into the kingdom. But Paul is realistic. He says, "I do this that I might save some. I have become *all* things to *all* men that by *all* means I might save some."

The point is that God has not rejected

his people. This thought would have brought horror to Paul. He would die if he saw what happened in church history. It violates his own experience and slanders the character of God and how God is working out his loyal-love in history to the remnant, to the Gentiles, and then unto the rest.

What are the implications of this material for us?

V. THE IMPLICATIONS

First, I find myself rebuked regarding my sin of ignorance. God would not have us be ignorant as to how he is working. Last year at this time, Professor Bloom published a classic work on education called 'The Closing of the American Mind'. In it, he skillfully attacks American education which tells its student that their lives are clean slates and they can build their own destiny, forgetful of their roots, heritage and history. He says that forgetfulness has led to arrogance about the present. I think the same is true of the church. We can talk about the "closing" of the spirit of the church and how forgetful we have been of our roots and how arrogant we have become. As a result, we view ourselves as a Gentile party excluding Jews. We have lost our appreciation of what has been handed to us. Don't forget how we have been welcomed into the older brother's party.

Second, this passage brings encouragement. How often have you felt like Elijah when facing evil in your workplace or in our nation? Even the church is apostate! We could say, "I alone am left," and pray for judgment. We think that if God would just reveal himself in power (signs and wonders) we could have a revival. Romans 11 says God can work this way, but it does not change the heart like the quiet remnant. The inarticulate voice of the saints whom you cannot see are bringing a message to our world.

This week I had one of those weeks I do not want to repeat. I had every leg of

the chair of my self-adequacy knocked out from under me. It began Sunday night when I had a meeting and felt totally inadequate as an administrator. Then when my wife shared the business of her schedule with me, I blurted out a typical male response, "Why don't you just cancel something?" The emotional walls went up! I felt inadequate as a husband. On Saturday, we attended the wedding of a fellow-pastor's daughter. When my six-year-old was not allowed to sit where she wanted, she slugged my wife. I felt inadequate as a father. Then I thought at least I could disciple men, but at my weekly meeting I felt totally inadequate to do even that. And I felt inadequate as a counselor. This went on and on. I prayed, "Let's go, God. Take me home!" Yet during the week, when every area of my life was exposed and vulnerable, I heard the inarticulate whisper of the remnant. I received a word of encouragement from my wife. Then I heard encouragement from a close friend. And finally I went to a prayer meeting on Friday night and fed on eternal life. None of these things will reach the front pages of our newspapers, but this is how God is working out his program—perfectly, quietly.

Third, I am also reproved regarding the sin of exclusivism. Remember Israel's sin was believing that God's remnant was based on works and race. They made their circle very small, for they would not let in the lame or the blind, let alone us Gentiles. I find the church has made the same mistake. We have excluded the Jews and have built our fellowship based upon race, economic background, and likenesses. This is so easy to do! We do not spread out our net as wide as God would like us to.

The extreme version of this is the Christian who believes his faith is for himself, that it is private. This text teaches that we are to be interconnected with the rest of humanity. Our faith is much bigger than you or me. God is concerned

about the believing remnant who are to be joined with the Gentiles. The Gentiles are in turn making jealous the rest of Israel. Everyone is interconnected—the remnant, the Gentiles, the rest. We are all one humanity. We cannot live life in isolation.

Finally, we are exhorted to magnify our ministry. Paul wrote this text in order to magnify his ministry because when he led Gentiles to Christ salvation came to the Jews. Therefore, he says, "You are on stage. Your faith is not a private experience." Salvation is not complete when we accept Christ but when the Jew accepts Christ. We must live like the prodigal son who has come home to a party. Even though it is a joyous celebration, we know it is not complete until our Jewish brother comes too.

I was encouraged at the wedding yesterday when I spoke with the harpist who told me he was Jewish and plays in the San Jose Symphony. As we talked, his face radiated joy because he was included in this Christian party. He was excited and delighted in our celebration!

When we went to Eastern Europe, one of my friends shared Christ with an Israeli on the plane. Upon arriving in Frankfurt, I grabbed the man and asked him to pray for us. I said, "We are going to the Gentile nations to share the gospel. This is your party! Pray for us." And he did.

I leave you with a saying from a famous rabbi, Baal Shem Tov. This was the last thing I saw at Yad Vashem as I left:

*Forgetfulness leads to exile,
While remembrance is the secret of
redemption.*

Amen.

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