

A REMNANT CHOSEN BY GRACE

Romans 11:1-16

Key Verse: 11:5

So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.

In Romans 10, we learned that anyone who believes in Jesus as his personal Savior and confesses him to be the Lord is saved by the grace of God. Sadly, a majority of the Israelites rejected Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Paul begins Chapter 11 with the question, “Did God reject Israel? Is he done with them because of their rejection?” His answer is “No!” Now, some of you, especially if you are a young generation, may say, “So what?” I understand this is a typical response of the Millennial Generation to many things today. They hear that God uses men and women of faith to deliver the good news to the unbelieving world. They say, “So what?” They hear that those who share the gospel of Jesus have beautiful feet, and their response is “So what?” They hear the news that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a speech in Congress to warn that Obama’s deal with Iran would turn the Middle East into a nuclear tinderbox. They may say, “So what? What does that have to do with me?” They may have the same reaction to Paul’s question in today’s passage. God has not rejected his people. “So what?”

Actually, Paul’s question is very much relevant to us today. If God abandoned his covenant with Israel because of their rejection, how can we be certain that he would not abandon us? Our eternal life is at stake. This is a life and death question for us. Let us pay attention to the word of God in today’s passage!

First, Did God reject his people? (1-4) Look at verse 1. *I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.* Paul says, “God has not rejected his people. No way. Look at me. I am the evidence! I am an Israelite through and through. And I have accepted Jesus as my Savior and Lord. I have preached the gospel to the Gentile world, fulfilling God’s purpose for Israel to be a kingdom of priests!” Then he declares in verse 2. *“God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.”* What does it mean God foreknew his people Israel? Doesn’t God know everyone in the world since he is an all-knowing God? Bible scholars note that the Greek word for “foreknew” here is “proegnō (προέγνω) which is more than simply knowing something or someone in advance. It means that the sovereign God chose in advance Israel to be his people. Paul’s point is that God is not done with his people. God is sovereign, thus, it is unthinkable for him to choose the nation Israel, only to abandon it because of her sin. Even the unfaithfulness of his people cannot thwart his purpose. And the presence of the elect among his people, like Paul, proves that he is not finished with them despite their unbelief.

God does not reject his people. He keeps all his promises. But he does so through a remnant of people who remain faithful to him. To help us understand this truth, Paul reminds us of the conversation between God and his servant Elijah in 1 Kings 19: *Don’t you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God*

against Israel: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? And what was God’s answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (2b-4). The Prophet Elijah fought valiantly against the Baal worshiping culture of his nation which was ruled by the evil king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel, who tried to make Baal their national god. But no one seemed to side with Elijah. He felt alone and tired. He despaired so much that he wanted to die. He complained: “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1Ki 19:14). But what was God’s answer to him? God told him that he had reserved for himself 7,000 faithful people who had not bowed the knee to Baal. God fulfills his redemptive purpose using a remnant. Let us think about this more deeply.

Second, a remnant chosen by grace (5-6). Let us read verse 5. *So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.* In Elijah’s time, God reserved 7,000 for himself. In Paul’s time, a majority of Israel rejected the Son of God. They rejected God’s purpose for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They rejected the Messiah and the mission for them to share the good news with the rest of the world. But Paul knew that there were some faithful believers among his people Israel. “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace,” he said. God fulfills his covenant promises using a remnant. God’s history is the history of the remnant. So a remnant in God’s history is precious. In our ministry, we also consider a remnant precious in God’s eyes. But this term generally does not have a good connotation in our society. Think about a carpet remnant or a fabric remnant. It denotes a leftover that has little value. Merchants try to get rid of it by having a remnant sale. But St. Paul says that God uses a remnant to fulfill his purpose. In Romans 9:27, Paul quotes the Prophet Isaiah concerning Israel: “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.” So do you want to be used by God in his redemptive history? Then be a remnant in God’s history!

How can we be God’s remnant? Paul says that a remnant is chosen by God’s grace (5). He says in verse 6. *And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.* We can be God’s remnant only by grace. By definition, grace is something we receive when we don’t deserve it. We cannot earn it. If we have to work hard to earn it, it won’t be grace. It would be called compensation. But we become a remnant only by grace so that we cannot boast. You may ask, “Wait a minute. We are justified by faith in Jesus alone only by grace. Now you are telling me that we become a remnant by grace alone?” That’s right. Everything is by grace, from start to finish. Even our faith is by grace. We cannot believe in Jesus without God’s grace upon us. This is what St. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-10: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” We cannot earn our salvation by works. It is only by grace. Any good works we do for God, we do it with a thankful heart, knowing that he saved us by his grace. It is very important for us to remember this. St. Paul never forget

God's grace upon his life. He testified: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1Co 15:10).

What can we learn from God who works through a remnant chosen by his grace? Paul realized that God saved him not because he was a descendant of Abraham or because he was circumcised, but because of God's grace through Jesus Christ. God works through a remnant chosen by his grace. A remnant is always a minority. God is not like a politician who is interested in a majority for a political reason. He is not swayed by the popular opinions of a majority. Instead, he works through people who accept and believe in his words even if the number is small. Likewise, we should not feel lonely or discouraged just because our number is small. Instead, we should be a remnant in God by holding on to his covenant promises.

However, being a remnant in God's redemptive history is not so easy. After devoting 10, 20, or 30 years of their prime life to campus mission, many of our coworkers feel like Elijah, especially there is no visible fruit to show for before God. It is not easy for our young people to be a God-fearing minority in today's culture. They face enormous peer pressure to conform to the popular trend of this world. They have to sacrifice a lot to hold on to the word of God and commit their lives to Christ. But this is the only way we can be a remnant in God. May God be gracious to each of us so that we may be a remnant by his grace!

Third, hope for the nation Israel (7-16). Beginning in verse 7, Paul turns to the majority people of Israel to explain why they failed to obtain God's righteousness, only to express his hope for the nation Israel. Look at verses 7-8. *What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day."* What did the people of Israel seek so earnestly to obtain? It is the righteousness of God. They wanted to obtain a right standing with God. This is what Paul said in Romans 9. "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone" (9:30-32). As we said time and again, we are justified by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus. But the Jews tried to obtain the righteousness of God on their own. They rejected Jesus who had come to save them. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. The elect among them accepted Jesus and became a remnant in God's history. But a majority of them hardened their hearts. They had eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear. We learn here that if we seek the righteousness on our own based on our works, our hearts will be hardened. If we reject God's love and grace, we become hardened. This is a warning for us.

And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their

backs be bent forever” (9-10). Their table in verse 9 refers to God's blessings upon Israel, such as their privilege of being a chosen people and the word of God they were entrusted with. Ironically, this very blessing became a snare for them. The privilege of being a chosen people made them proud until they rejected the promised Messiah. The more God provided for them, the more they took it for granted. They had no appreciation of God's love. They were like some welfare recipients in our society who complain more than express their gratitude. The chosen people betrayed God's love by turning to Canaanite idols again and again. They abandoned God's purpose for them. Again, this is a warning for us. God has given us the freedom of choice. We have the freedom to accept or reject God's grace and mission. But there are consequences of rejecting his grace and mission. Our hearts become hardened and then our eyes become darkened so that we cannot see what God is doing. May God help us to repent our proud and ungrateful hearts and accept the grace of God and the mission to share the gospel with others!

Look at verse 11. *Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.* In verses 11-32, Paul raises two questions concerning Israel's rejection of Jesus and God's redemptive purpose: “Did Israel stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?” and “How did God use Israel's fall to accomplish his redemptive purpose?” Paul's answers to these questions give us a deep insight into the mind and heart of God. So what is his answer to the first question, “Did they stumble beyond recovery?” He says, “Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. But he wanted his own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves” (11b; NLT). In other words, God used their rejection of Jesus to bring salvation to the Gentiles, with the hope that the salvation of the Gentiles would make Israel become jealous so that they would turn to Jesus. Our God is the God who uses even the transgression of Israel as a way of saving people. “Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!” (11:33)

Paul continues in verses 12-14. *But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.* St. Paul devoted his entire Christian life to the ministry of bringing the Gentiles to Christ. It was because the Risen Christ met him on his way to Damascus and saved him from his sins, and then commissioned him to be his chosen instrument to proclaim his name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel (Ac 9:15). Paul really loved his Bible students and coworkers from the Gentile cities such as Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. But that does not mean he didn't love his own people Israel. On the contrary, he loved them so much that he was willing to give up his own salvation if that would bring his people to Christ (9:2). In fact, every time he went to a foreign city as a missionary, he first visited the Jewish synagogue in town to share the gospel with his own people. Only after they rejected his message, he would move on to the Gentile people. Paul was thankful to God for the Gentiles who accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Now he

had a hope that the successful ministry among the Gentiles would make some of his people become jealous and turn to Christ.

There is no doubt Paul loved the Israelites. In verse 15, he again expresses his hope for the nation Israel. *For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?* Paul says that since their rejection meant that God offered salvation to the rest of the world, their acceptance will be even more wonderful. It will be life for those who were dead! (NLT) As he declared in Romans 5:9: “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” Life from the dead – this is our new position in Christ. We used to be dead in our sin, now we are alive in Christ (Ro 6:13). The gospel brings a new life to anyone who believes in Jesus (2Co 5:17).

Look at verse 16. *If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.* What do “the dough offered as firstfruits,” “the whole batch,” “the root” and “the branches” symbolize in this analogy? The NLT version translates the verse this way: “And since Abraham and the other patriarchs were holy, their descendants will also be holy—just as the entire batch of dough is holy because the portion given as an offering is holy. For if the roots of the tree are holy, the branches will be, too.” So both the dough offered as firstfruits and the root refer to the patriarchs of Israel. The whole batch and the branches refer to the nation of Israel. To be holy here means to “set apart” by God. Paul’s point in verse 16 is that God will keep his covenant promise to Abraham that many of his descendants will be saved--those who accept the grace of God rather than insist on their own righteousness. This is how Paul saw Israel in God’s eyes. We will learn more about this in the second part of Chapter 11. We will learn that God’s rejection of Israel is temporary, not permanent. He hardened their hearts so that the Gentiles could be saved. Then, in the end, “all Israel” will be saved.

We learned from this passage that God has not rejected the nation Israel. He is not done with them. His rejection is only partial, not total. As he had reserved 7,000 in Elijah’s time, there is a remnant chosen by grace at the present time. His work of salvation continues through the remnant. In spite of Israel’s rejection of Christ and world mission, God uses his sovereign power to accomplish his redemptive purpose. May God help each of us to be a remnant in God’s redemptive history!