

GOD'S REMNANT AND GOD'S HOPE

Romans 11:1-36

Key Verse: 11:4

“And what was God’s answer to him? ‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’”

In chapter 10, we learned that God’s message to the world is: “Jesus is Christ the Lord.” Whoever confesses with his mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believes in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead will be saved. The focus of our message should be, “Jesus is Lord.” May God save many young Americans through this message of salvation.

In chapter 11, Paul concludes his discourse on Israel’s role in God’s history. He teaches us that God always carries out his mission through his remnant. Moreover, God has undying hope for his people.

First, a remnant chosen by grace (1-6).

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.” The people of Israel could easily feel that God had rejected them. From a human point of view, they deserved to be rejected. In their self-righteousness and pride they had crucified the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It was a great sin against God. However, Paul says clearly that God had not rejected his people. God was with his people through a remnant who accepted Jesus. Paul himself was one of the remnants.

Paul had been a Pharisee and a leader of the anti-Christian movement. But the Lord Jesus visited him and spoke to him personally. Jesus did not condemn Paul, but forgave him and commissioned him as an apostle to the Gentiles and to the people of Israel. When Paul thought about God's grace on his own life, he was convinced that God had not rejected his people.

Throughout history, God's work has been done through a remnant. For example, Elijah was a mighty prophet, known for his great spirit, who stood on God's side during a terrible period of moral and spiritual decline. But his people were too sinsick to stand on God's side. The power of Satan working through evil King Ahab and Queen Jezebel was overwhelming. Finally, Elijah 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" (3). Elijah was utterly discouraged and tired after a hard spiritual struggle with no visible fruit. He became too depressed to serve God any longer. We understand him. We have been shocked by an onslaught of immorality, violence and godlessness in our own time. Sometimes we feel too depressed to continue.

Look at verse 4. "And what was God's answer to him? 'I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'" God was working mightily in Israel. God was quietly and steadily helping individual Israelites to remain true to God and not compromise with idol worship. Their number was seven thousand. It is surprising that the great prophet Elijah did not know about this. But there were seven thousand remnant people who stood on God's side.

Look at verse 5. "So, too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace." Paul deeply realized that God was working through a remnant. During his

missionary journeys he preached first in Jewish synagogues in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Ephesus. Inevitably, a majority of Jews quickly turned against Paul and became enemies of the gospel. But a few accepted the message, such as Priscilla and Aquila, and Timothy. These remnant people became the foundation for God's church in every city. The Twelve apostles were also remnant people. Peter, James, John, and company were all Israelites. Yet they were chosen by Jesus' grace and raised as shepherds and missionaries for his world salvation purpose. God's history is a history of the remnant people in every generation.

While world history tosses and turns like the surface waves, God's work in history flows steadily through his remnant, like the undercurrent of the ocean. Jesus taught the parable of the sower (Mk 4:1-20). The gospel message goes out to all kinds of people. But most of them do not retain the message; only a minority do. Yet this minority has the capacity to bear abundant spiritual fruit, far out of proportion to their number. Therefore, we must have eyes to see through the changing trends of the world and to recognize God's remnant people. God is carrying out his world mission purpose through his remnant people.

For example, there was one man Abraham. He seemed too old to do much and he was somewhat sorrowful and fatalistic because he had no son. But God said to him, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2,3). Abraham accepted this promise and lived by faith. God worked through Abraham's faith to bless the whole world down through the generations. However, Abraham was hardly recognized by his own generation.

We pray for North America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But sometimes we are discouraged by the trend of godlessness. Sometimes we feel lonely, like Elijah. Still, God is working mightily in America through his remnant people. Former President Ronald Reagan passed away last week. The eulogies about him reveal that he was indeed a Christian president. Then there is Dr. Billy Graham, Mother Barry, and so many others who live as God's remnant people.

Dr. Joseph Schafer was raised in a devout Catholic family. He was a lovely honor student by day, and a rock star by night. But through one-to-one Bible study with a humble Korean missionary, he met Jesus as his personal Savior. He accepted God's calling as a campus shepherd. He studied for a Ph.D. at Harvard University. During that time, he had to overcome temptation that came through liberal minded people. To do so, he drove from Boston to New York, five hours one way, to join the Sunday worship service. Then he drove another five hours back to Boston. He did this every Sunday for four years. God made him a blessing to many people in New York. Later, God blessed him to marry Sharon, a sensitive and artistic Christian woman, and establish a beautiful house church. God sent him to Penn State University as a Ph.D. shepherd. He served for over ten years, sharing the gospel by word of mouth and through his sacrificial life. When the call came for an American shepherd family to go to Australia, he offered his sabbatical year and went there. He has been used greatly as a Bible teacher, shepherd and spiritual leader. We also remember Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry. One day they popped up in the news as American women missionaries to Afghanistan. By faith we must know that there are many Americans among God's remnant people in the mission fields of the world.

Moreover, each of us must see that we are God's remnant people in our time. Sometimes we see only our own sins and problems. Then we can become depressed and useless. However, by God's grace, we are God's remnant people in this generation. I believe I am God's remnant in this generation. You are God's remnant in this generation.

How are these remnant people preserved? Look at verse 6. "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." God's remnant are chosen and preserved by God's grace. By God's grace alone, God preserves young American people for himself. They are on our campuses right now. They will accept our invitation to Bible study. They will grow spiritually and bear fruit to God. Let's repent of our depression and narrow vision. Let's ask God to help us see the remnant of God in our times.

Second, the others were hardened (7-10).

Though God was working through a remnant, the fact remained that as a nation, Israel had rejected Christ. John says, "He (Jesus) came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (Jn 1:11). Instead, they criticized him based on his human background. When people confront God's grace in Jesus and reject it, something happens to them. They become hardened in heart. Look at verses 7-8. "What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.'" God gave a spirit of stupor to those who reject Christ. This makes them feel dazed and confused and become dysfunctional. The human heart is indeed delicate. When it rejects the truth, it gets hard. When it rejects God, it gets hard. Foolish people think

that if they don't like something they can just harden their hearts and forget about it. But those who harden their hearts toward God become stupid and foolish. Spiritually speaking, they become blind and deaf. They think they are serving God, but they are acting as enemies of God.

David suffered much because of such people. He realized that they were enemies of God's salvation work through Christ. He said in verse 9, "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them." "Table" refers to God's blessing, such as their privilege of being a chosen people. Ironically, this very blessing made them proud until they rejected the promised Messiah. God has given us freedom of choice. We can reject God's grace. But there are consequences. We become hardhearted and then stupid. Therefore, we must be quick to repent and accept the grace of God.

Third, God's wisdom to win the Israelites (11-16).

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." When the Israelites hardened their hearts and rejected the gospel, the consequences were serious. However, Paul saw God's hidden purpose at work even in this. It was to make Israel envious. In this way, God wanted to motivate them to accept Jesus and fulfill God's glorious purpose for them.

The Israelites were the chosen people of God. God wanted to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So he blessed them abundantly. But in the time of blessing they became proud and lazy. They enjoyed the milk and honey of

the promised land, yet totally ignored God's purpose for world salvation. Most tragically, they rejected Christ when he came. Then God sent the gospel to the Gentiles. During Paul's time, Gentile churches sprang up in Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus and even in Rome. The gospel was being spread among Gentiles to the ends of the earth. The Gentiles came to know God personally. The Gentiles became the instruments of spreading God's grace to the world. Gentile children began to do better on SAT's than Israelite children. Everything seemed to go well for the Gentiles. Of course, God loved the Gentiles. But to Paul, God had a hidden reason for pouring his blessing upon the Gentiles: it was to make Israel envious.

God is wise and patient in winning his people back. It seems that he employed the "jealousy strategy" commonly used by women. One lady had a boyfriend who took her affection for granted. So she won his best friend's heart and spent time with him. Upon seeing this, the boy said to her, "What a fool I was! I'm sorry," and begged forgiveness. In the same way, God wanted to arouse the Jews to envy by pouring his abundant blessing on the Gentiles. To Paul, it was clear that God had a great hope for his people to come back to him.

In verses 13-16, Paul teaches the Gentiles how to see themselves and the Israelites in God's redemptive history. The Gentiles are like the best friend who was used to arouse jealousy. The Gentiles are like the Syrophenician woman who was willing to take the leftover crumbs of blessing after the Israelite children were fully satisfied (Mk 7:28). So they should not be proud. They must know how much God loves Israel. Our Puritan forefathers, such as Jonathan Edwards, prayed for Israel to accept Jesus as Lord and be saved. They believed that this would bring great blessing on the whole world. Verse 15 says it would be like the dead coming to

life. In verse 16, Paul uses the offering of firstfruits to teach that through the remnant God hopes to restore all Israel.

Fourth, Gentiles should fear God and thank God (17-24).

Look at verse 17. "If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root..." Jews who did not accept Jesus because of pride and unbelief became like broken off branches; they were excluded from God's history. The wild olive shoot refers to the Gentiles who were comparatively undisciplined and useless. But God grafted them into the cultivated olive tree so they could enjoy the nourishing sap from the olive root. Here, "the olive root" refers to God's redemptive history, primarily to the patriarchs and to Jesus Christ. The Gentile Christians are branches. Upon discovering God's great favor toward them, they could easily become proud. But if they became proud and unbelieving, they too would be cut off (22b). So Paul warns them: "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid" (20b). We must recognize God's kindness and be grateful to God (22).

Fifth, God's hope for world salvation (25-36).

Finally, Paul saw God's mysterious hope that all Israel would be saved. How could this be? Look at verses 26b-27, "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." This deliverer is Jesus Christ. When the Jews simply receive him as Lord they can have forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. If they insist on their own righteousness, they are enemies of the gospel. But God loves them on account of the patriarchs. God sees their disobedience as the opportunity to receive

mercy. God is full of hope. Look at verse 32. "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." God hopes that all people, Jews and Gentiles, will be saved.

As a conclusion, let's read verses 33-36. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

In this passage we learn that God is fulfilling his world salvation work through his remnant. Although his people rejected him, God has a great hope for them to come back to him and fulfill their calling. In his unsearchable wisdom, God wants to see that the Jews and the Gentiles all come to him through Jesus and receive salvation and world mission vision. Let's accept God's grace in Jesus and live as his remnant people.