

Romans 11:1-24
(Isaiah 10:20-23; John 7:37-43)
“A Remnant, Chosen by Grace”

Introduction

In Romans 9-11, Paul addresses the question of why so many Israelites have rejected their Messiah. If God’s election of Israel to be his covenant people did not prevent most from rejecting their promised Redeemer, why should Gentiles have any reason for hoping that they will fare any better at the end of the day? In answering this question, Paul argues first, in chapter nine, for God’s sovereignty in salvation. Then in chapter ten, he addresses the human side, that God’s sovereignty is not determinism that precludes human freedom and responsibility. He calls us to respond to God’s grace by confessing with our mouth that Jesus is Lord, by believing in our heart that God raised him from the dead, and by joining the Lord on his mission to redeem his lost world.

Now, in chapter eleven, Paul gives us a sweeping view of history that comprehends all people, both Jew and Gentile, in God’s redemptive mission, and calls us, again, to realize how vast is God’s grace in reaching out to those from every nation, how urgent is our responsibility to turn in faith to God’s Redeemer, and how wonderful is the mystery of God’s redemptive purposes that lie at the heart of the meaning of human history.

We will seek to understand this passage by taking Paul’s two central questions asked in verses one and eleven: “Has God rejected his people?” (11:1), and “Did they [that is, the people of Israel] stumble in order that they might [irrevocably] fall? (11:11). Finally, we will ask our own question: namely, What conclusion are we to draw from this?

Body

1. Has God rejected his people? By no means! (11:1-10).

Paul cites his own example, “I myself an Israelite,” and then reminds us of the story of Elijah, who thought that he was the last faithful person left in Israel during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 19:10), but was told by the Lord that seven thousand Israelites had not bowed their knees in worship of Baal (1 Kings 19:18). The problem was not that God had rejected his people, but rather that God’s people had rejected him. Nevertheless, God always kept a remnant faithful to the covenant, not on the basis of their works, but on the basis of his grace (11:5-6).

2. Did they (the people of Israel) stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! (11:11-16).

Well, then, one might ask whether the rejection of her Messiah by the majority of Israelites means that they have irrevocably cut themselves off from God's grace. Does Israel's stumbling over the stumbling stone of the gospel – that is, of salvation by grace rather than by law keeping – mean that they are without hope with regard to salvation? Or, asked another way, does the doctrine of election mean that those who have not responded to God's grace have fallen for good and are irretrievably lost? By no means, insists Paul.

In order to explain, Paul now turns and addresses the gentile Christians specifically (11:13), giving us a word both of encouragement and of warning, an invitation and a challenge. He sketches a scheme of salvation history that looks like this:

The old covenant, or the era of ethnic Israel in God's plan:

- The cause of Israel's election was God's grace alone.
- The purpose of Israel's election was the salvation of the Gentiles ("the nations," Genesis 12:1f).
- The reality of Israel's election was that not all Israelites were saved and not all Gentiles were lost. There is always a remnant of each kept by God's grace.
- The key: under the old covenant, God's rejection of the Gentiles was partial, not total, temporary, not final.

The new covenant, or the era of the Gentiles in God's plan:

- The cause of the mission to the nations is God's grace alone.
- The purpose is the salvation of those from all the nations, including ethnic Israel (11:11f).
- The reality of the mission to the nations is that not all Gentiles are saved and not all Jews are lost. There is always a remnant of each kept by God's grace.
- The key: under the new covenant, God's rejection of his old covenant people, Israel, is partial, not total, temporary, not final.

3. What conclusion are we to draw from this? God has only one family, not two, and God's people, God's true Israel, consists of both Jews and Gentiles, who have been saved by grace and who "stand fast through faith" (11:17-24).

Traditional theology tends to describe salvation history as though the church has replaced Israel, and that God no longer regards Israel as his people. This has, in fact, been the prevailing view of reformed Christians. A more recent interpretive view, dispensationalism, sees Israel and the church as eternally separate, with Israel facing one destiny on earth and the church facing another destiny in heaven. Neither view, I think, comprehends what Paul is clearly saying here.

Paul says, not that the church replaces Israel, nor that the church and Israel are separate, but rather that God has one people, one “olive tree,” and that all of his people, Jew and Gentile alike, are branches of that tree through faith in God’s Messiah. In other words, Jews are not saved by becoming Gentiles. Rather, the remnant of Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by being joined to the true Israel of God, those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation whom God has saved by grace and who live by faith, that is by confessing with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in their heart that God raised him from the dead (10:9-10).

Even if one is born into a covenant family, if one does not believe, then he is cut off from God’s true Israel. Even if one is born outside the covenant, to a family that does not know the Lord, if he believes in God’s Messiah, he will be grafted into God’s true Israel (11:20-23).

Conclusion

We spend so much of our lives on quests that lead to nothing lasting. We are taught to seek answers to our questions, but too few of us pursue the greatest questions, those that issue in eternal life or death, those that concern our standing with the living God to whom each one of us will one day give account.

Are you presuming upon a decision made in the past but never built upon? Do you think of salvation as an event or as a new life, a life transformed by God’s grace, in which you stand by faith? Is the life of God’s one true olive tree flowing through you, transforming the affections of your heart and making all things new? Are you grafted into the true Israel of God through faith in Jesus?

Don’t let this Advent season come and go and leave you unchanged, untouched by God’s majestic grace.

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