

## Things Aren't Always As They Seem

### Romans 11: 1 – 5

- Today we start the next chapter in our study of the book of Romans, and to be honest it is a chapter that is fraught with controversy and is one of the most difficult in Scripture to understand.
  - Chapter 11 of the book of Romans is part of a parentheses in Paul's letter to the Romans that begins in chapter 9 and ends with a great doxology of praise that comes at the end of chapter 11.
    - Without going into great detail, we will remember that chapters 1 – 8 dealt with the theological truth of justification by faith alone. Or to put it another way, the way a person is made right with God is not by works but by faith in Christ's life, death, and resurrection for them.
      - ♦ Christ lived the life of perfect obedience that we are each called to live. He then died the death that we deserved to die because we, have not lived that life of perfect obedience. Through faith in Christ:

**Colossians 3: 3** You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

- ♦ What does that mean? It means that Christ's death for your sin became your death to sin, and Christ's life of righteousness became your life of righteousness. This is justification by faith, and justification by faith is the Gospel. Now that is a summary of the first 8 chapters of the book of Romans that took us about a year and half to get through.
  - Chapters 12 – 16, which Lord willing we will get to around Easter, deal with the application to our lives of this great doctrine of justification. Or to put it another way, in view of what Christ has done for us at the cross, how then should we go about living our lives?
  - But in between chapters 1 – 8, on the doctrine of justification by faith, and chapters 12 – 16, on the application of that doctrine, is the parentheses of chapters 9 – 11 that we have been dealing with for the past few months.
- Why does Paul feel the need to insert this long parenthesis? Well, to see that, we need to remind ourselves of Paul's soaring conclusion to the doctrine of justification by faith that we find at the end of chapter 8.
  - Chapter 8 ends with great assurance and certainty.

**Romans 8: 28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

- Your justification is sure and certain because it is God who is at work, and because of that you can be:

**Romans 8: 38 – 39** For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- Now, how does a person reconcile those great statements of assurance and certainty with the fact that the Jews, who were God's chosen people, have rejected the Gospel and in their place the Gentiles have come streaming in?
- Paul's purpose in the parentheses of chapters 9 – 11 is to show that there is no problem reconciling these two things at all. God's purpose in salvation has been, is, and will be carried out.
- Chapters 9 – 11 are all about the case and condition of Jews at the time Paul wrote this letter. From the time Christ ascended into heaven, until shortly before Paul wrote this letter, the early church was primarily Jewish.
  - But even though the early church was primarily Jewish, those who made up the early church, were a very small minority of the Jewish population. For the most part the Jewish heart was hardened against Jesus, against the Gospel.
    - So as Paul begins chapter 9, he expresses his great heartfelt concern for the state of his fellow countrymen and women.

**Romans 9: 2 – 3** I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup>For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

- If God called the Jews and made them His chosen people, then why were so many Jews rejecting Jesus the Messiah, and the Gospel? The answer to that question is found in verse 6 of Romans 9.

**Romans 9: 6 – 7** But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, <sup>7</sup>and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.

- ♦ What is Paul teaching there? There is an Israel within Israel—a spiritual Israel within physical Israel. And Paul's point is that while God had special intentions for physical Israel (the nation of Israel), God's purpose was never to save all of Abraham's physical descendants. For example, Isaac and Ishmael were both Abraham's biological descendants, but God only chose Isaac to be the recipient of the blessings promised to Abraham. The same thing happened one generation later as God chose Jacob rather than Esau.
- As Paul develops this line of argument, in chapter 9, he shows us that salvation is entirely according to God's sovereign purpose in election.

**Romans 9: 11** though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—

- ♦ God alone is responsible for a person's salvation.

- But in chapter 10, Paul lays out the other side of the coin. That is, while God's sovereign grace alone is responsible for a person's salvation, a person's condemnation and damnation is their responsibility alone.

**Romans 10: 16** But they have not all obeyed the gospel.

- ♦ Men and women are condemned for their own disobedience and rebellion toward God.

**Romans 10: 21** "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

- ♦ God saves, but man is responsible for his own rebellion. That is the message of chapters 9 and 10.
- Paul has shown us how those statements are undeniably true based on Scripture, but he has not yet fully explained why, in view of this, God hasn't saved all of Israel. Yes, Israel had stubborn and contrary hearts, but if God is sovereign over salvation, and Israel is God's chosen people, then why doesn't God make all of Israel accept the Messiah and the Gospel?
  - Which brings us to chapter 11, the conclusion of this parentheses. Chapter 11 begins with Paul asking this question:

**Romans 11: 1** I ask, then, has God rejected his people?

- Paul immediately answers that question with:

**Romans 11: 1** By no means!

- And in the rest of chapter 11 Paul is going to show why that is true.
  - ♦ First, by showing us in verses 1 – 10 that, throughout its history, God has been at work, saving and preserving a remnant of Israel, and as long as a remnant has and is being saved no one can argue that God is not saving His people.
  - ♦ But that is not all. Paul will go on in verses 11 – 32 to tell us that not only has God always been at work preserving a remnant, but there is a tremendous restoration of Israel that is still in store one day.
- Which means in a few weeks, we are about to delve into the subject of eschatology. Eschatology is a part of theology that is concerned with the doctrine of the End Times, the time when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead.
  - And there are all kinds of end times views that people have arrived at based on their study of the Bible. The church in our day is divided among competing eschatological camps. There is post-millennialism, pre-millennialism, amillennialism, preterism, partial preterism, dispensationalism, and others. Books pertaining to eschatology, such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey, have made the best-seller lists, and the *Left Behind* series swept through the fiction market of America.
  - How we understand eschatology is, to a large degree, connected to how we understand Romans 11. This chapter is Paul's most complete teaching on the future of the nation of Israel. Much of the dispute about eschatology in our

time focuses on what, if anything, is still to happen with ethnic Israel, the Jews who exist today.

- Now, what does the fact that there are so many different views regarding eschatology, and the future of Israel within those views, teach us? It teaches us that what we are about to study is not as crystal clear as some would have you to believe. In fact, while there are some eschatological truths that we can know for certain, there is an intentional element of mystery in all of this.

**Romans 11: 33** Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

- What is Paul doing? He is telling us that much of what God is doing is going to remain a mystery until it happens. Even Jesus acknowledged this.

**Mark 13:32** “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

- In fact, whenever Jesus taught on his return, there was just one thing that he emphasized over and over again. It was simply to be ready.
  - ♦ That is my personal end times theology. Jesus is coming again. I don’t know when, so I must be ready each day, worshipping and serving, doing what He has called me to do.
  - ♦ I don’t need to know how all of this is exactly going to work out with Israel, and the truth is, I can’t know, because, as Paul says in Romans 11: 33, God’s ways in all of this are mysterious and inscrutable.
- So, as we approach these things, we must approach them with a genuine spirit of humility that leads us to simply worship and serve God by living out the truth that God has already clearly revealed to us.
- With that in mind, let’s dig into verses 1 – 5 and see what we can learn that won’t just fill our heads with knowledge but fill our hearts with a passion for God and Christ our savior to give us strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

**Romans 11: 1 – 5** I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 3 “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” 4 But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” 5 So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

- Paul begins, as he has done so often throughout this letter, with a rhetorical question.

### 1. Has God rejected His people?

- In Old Testament times, Israel was called out of paganism and set apart as a nation with God as its ultimate king. God’s purpose for Israel was for them to be His people and a light to the Gentiles, and to bring forth the Messiah.



- It was a seemingly odd choice. From a human perspective, the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, or Romans would have been a far better choice, because each of those civilizations had something to bring to the table.
- But Israel wasn't a great and powerful people. They were a small nomadic tribe.
  - Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, had grown skeptical of the Christian faith and was speaking with his chaplain. He asked his chaplain to prove to him in one simple statement that the Bible was true. The chaplain responded to Frederick, "I can prove the existence of God with one or two words— the Jews."
  - The history of Israel all the way back to Abraham and right up to the present day is a remarkable, striking testimony of God's providential control of human history, especially redemptive history. There is no other nation in the world like it.
    - ♦ After the Romans conquered Jerusalem in AD 70, the Jews were dispersed and sent out of their homeland. Despite two thousand years of exile, they have never lost their ethnic and national identity.
    - ♦ We all assimilate— except for the Jews. They still have an unquenchable awareness of their ethnic and national identity, and a longing for the glory of Israel to be restored.
- Paul lamented earlier, in the book of Romans, the fact that Israel has missed the gospel by seeking salvation through the law, and now he poses a question about the consequences. Has God exercised a full and final rejection of the Jewish people? And immediately, Paul replies to his own question with the answer, "Certainly not!" God has not, and will not, categorically rejected Old Testament Israel.
  - And in the following verses, Paul gives two proofs, arguing from the lesser (his own personal salvation) to the greater (the remnant that God preserved during the days of Elijah), to prove that God has not categorically rejected Israel.
- We'll look at those two proofs in a moment, but first, I want to look at the reason Paul gives for why God has not rejected his people. It is found in verse 2 between the two proofs he gives.

**Romans 11: 2** God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

- The word foreknew contains the reason why God has not rejected Israel. People, often mistakenly look at that word foreknew and assume it means nothing more than God knowing ahead of time, which is certainly true.
  - God does know ahead of time. But if that was all that foreknew meant in the Bible then God never would have chosen Israel in the first place.
    - ♦ Go through the pages of the Old Testament and just look at how Israel behaved. For instance, right after God led Israel out of Egypt, Israel turned away from God to worship a golden calf they had made. Listen to how God described them at that time.

**Exodus 32: 9** The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.

- Do you think their behavior surprised God? Of course not, God foreknows everything. But if God foreknew that they would act this way then why did He choose them in the first place? Because God’s foreknowing means more than just knowing about something. It is an intimate knowing like a husband knows his wife.

**Deuteronomy 7: 6 – 8** The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. <sup>7</sup>It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, <sup>8</sup>but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

- In the Bible that is what it means for God to foreknow. It is for God to make a choice to set His affection and love on a person, or in this case a people to make them His own people.

**Amos 3: 1 – 2** Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.”

- Think what God is saying there. It ties right into what He said in Deuteronomy 7. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” God knows everything. In that sense, He knows all the families of the earth. But clearly His knowing of Israel is different. What is the difference? Israel was chosen by God, out of all of the families on the earth, to be the object of His affections. Israel was chosen by God to know God and to be known by God.
- That is why God could never reject Israel in its entirety. That is why God’s purpose for Israel is not yet finished and she continues to exist, when no other nation would have, because for all these years God has lived in faithfulness to His covenant promises to her, even as she continues to live in unfaithfulness to Him.
  - ♦ Think what that means for you. God knows you. He knows everything you have done or have left undone. But His love for you is not conditioned on what you have done. It is conditioned solely on His sovereign choice to love you. There is nothing you can do to undo that choice.
  - ♦ How do you know if God has chosen to love you? If you are even asking the question, then that means He has. Because you wouldn’t care and you wouldn’t ask, if God were not making himself known to you and calling you to Himself. So, respond to that call and believe the Gospel, that God sent His Son to live and die for you so that you can live for Him and with Him forever.



- But Paul doesn't just tell us why God could never reject Israel as a whole, he also gives us two proofs. The first proof is himself.

## 2. Paul's personal evidence that proves God has not rejected His people.

**Romans 11: 1** For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

- Paul was a true Israelite—the direct biological offspring of Abraham. But not just of Abraham, of Abraham's grandson Jacob, whose name God later changed to Israel. But Paul was not just the offspring of one of the twelve sons of Israel. He was from the tribe of Benjamin. The very last son of Israel, born to Israel's beloved wife Rachel, and he was the only son of Israel that had actually been born in the Promised Land. That made him, as Paul describes himself in Philippians 3, a Hebrew of Hebrews—a true Israelite.
- But remember, a Hebrew of Hebrews wasn't the only way Paul described himself in his writings. He also said this about himself:

**1 Timothy 1: 13 – 15** though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

- Paul was not only a Hebrew of Hebrews, he was an Israelite that at one time hated and opposed Jesus, and yet, when Paul wasn't even looking to be saved, God saved him.
- Paul was living proof that God had not rejected Israel, because God in His mercy saved Paul, a true Israelite, who was also the foremost of sinners.
- Again, no matter who you are or what you have done, if God has set his affection upon you, you will be saved.

## 3. Precedent from Israel's history that proves that God has not rejected His people.

**Romans 11: 2 – 5** Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? <sup>3</sup> "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." <sup>4</sup> But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." <sup>5</sup> So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

- The background for those verses comes from 1 Kings 18 and 19, during a time when the ten Northern Tribes of Israel were under the reign of a wicked king named Ahab and had become apostate—they had turned from God to worship Baal. Baal was the god of the pagan nations that lived around Israel.
  - Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to use their power to bring down fire from heaven. An altar was placed on Mount Carmel, and Elijah told the priests of Baal to ignite the fire of sacrifice on the altar. Those priests prayed, wept, and called, but heaven was silent. Elijah mocked them, saying,

**1 Kings 18: 27** "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

- Although the priests called and performed their sacred rituals, cutting themselves, there was no response. Elijah ordered that the altar be doused with water. After it was saturated, he prayed, and the Lord God omnipotent sent fire from heaven that consumed the altar.
  - It was a great victory for Elijah, but something very interesting happened to Elijah after that victory. Worn out and exhausted, he became depressed, because in spite of the great victory at Mt. Carmel there was no great revival in Israel. And in fact, Elijah's life became imperiled as Queen Jezebel ordered his execution.
  - Rather than a revival, it seemed like an extinction was just around the corner and Elijah became convinced that he was the last true Israelite standing in Israel. In a deep depression, Elijah went and hid in a cave, and then God showed up.
  - The verses that Paul quotes in Romans 11: 2 – 5 record the conversation that God had with Elijah, in which God told Elijah that even in this most darkest of times in Israel's history, God had preserved a remnant by grace—7000 men who had not bowed the knee to Baal.
- Even in the very worst of times, God was at work preserving a remnant of Israel out Israel. God had and would not reject all of Israel—at a minimum a remnant would be saved. God would always be faithful to the promises He made to Israel.

#### **4. A remnant is preserved by grace alone.**

- If it was by any other means other than grace, there would be no remnant.

**Romans 3: 22 – 23** For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

- In the times we live in, it is easy to feel like Elijah. It seems as though the world is going to hell in a hand basket. Do you know why it seems that way? Because it is.
- But, if you are here and in Christ, you are part of a remnant that is being saved. This work of salvation isn't our work. It is God's work, and God is sovereign and in control. No matter how bad things look, there is no reason for pessimism, because our God reigns!
- The Church is the church of the living God, and she will continue and do her work until the fulness of the Gentiles and all of Israel is saved. It is a sure and certain thing. Not because of us, but according to the work of God in election.
- No matter how strong the enemy may seem, no matter how they may blaspheme, and seem to be frustrating God's purpose, the purpose of God is sovereign and sure and will be carried out. A remnant will be saved by grace.

**Hebrews 10: 35 - 39** Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. <sup>36</sup> For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. <sup>37</sup> For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; <sup>38</sup> but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." <sup>39</sup> But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.