

Opening Scripture Roman 11:33–36

Introduction: When I was in my second 9th grade year, I was dating two girls, each of whom did not know I was dating the other. I spent the entire last semester desperately trying to keep my secret and I wrote them both love letters and accidentally switched the letters. At first they were filled with jealous rage toward each other—until they realized who the real object of their ire should be—ME. They commiserated and called each other on their kitchen rotary dial phones and they both called me together (on the phone at the same time) to slam dunk me. And of course, I deserved that. But it still hurt though. Rejection always.

Paul's overarching theme in these three chapters (9–11) has been one sustained thought: God has elected, from among the Jews and Gentiles a people who are made righteous in Christ (Rom 9:24).

So, Paul anticipates another objection to his claims—The fact that God has now turned to the Gentiles and offered them salvation by grace through faith resulting in the good confession that Jesus is Lord, *Wouldn't that mean that God has rejected his people, ethnic Israelites, which he said he would never do?*

Rom 11:1–6 “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? Absolutely not! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Or don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ **Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I am the only one left, and they are trying to take my life!** ⁴ But what was God's answer to him? **I have left seven thousand for myself who have not bowed down to Baal.** ⁵ In the same way, then, there is also at the present time a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶ Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace.”

We're going to look at a final objection Paul raises here and look at his argument against this protest that God has somehow rejected all Israelites. His answer involves four arguments: (1) His personal experience, (2) God's pattern of salvation, (3) God's purpose in election, (4) a prophecy regarding ethnic Israel.

Let's look at Paul's case for why God has not rejected ethnic Israel:

1. Paul's personal experience. Rom 11:1 "For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin."

The tribe of Benjamin, with the exception of Judah, the Levites and a few others, was one of the only tribes whose records at the time were fully intact, meaning you could trace your origin all the way back to the tribal head—Benjamin the son of Jacob.

You get the sense that Paul is saying, "Just think about it for a second. You all know my story. Here I was an up-and-coming Pharisee—a member of one of the strictest branches of Judaism. In college, having studied Torah for years, passed all my exams, Valedictorian of my class, awarded the "Excellence in Jewish Legal Research" medallion—and one thing left to do to prove myself. ***Eradicate the world of this new, heretical sect of Jews who follow a crucified Messiah*** (which was outrageous and appalling); believed he had risen from the dead, and what's more, by Stephen's own admission as he breathed his last—they believed that this executed rebel ascended was exalted to the right hand of God. My job? To rid the world this blasphemous Jesus cult.

And after a successful initial campaign against Christians, I made my way to the city of Damascus breathing out threats of murder to the disciples, The Lord Jesus Christ appeared in a blinding light and saved me. A Jew of Jews. A Hebrew of Hebrews, rising in prominence among my peers. A man zealous for the law but ignorant of God's righteousness according to faith. And God saved a wretch like me...a religious, zealous man who wasn't seeking Christ at all."

Paul says, "God has absolutely not rejected every ethnic Israelite, and I am living proof of it."

What does Paul know? He knows this is the consistent witness in the OT is to preserve them as a people.

1 Sam 12:22 "The Lord will not abandon his people, because of his great name and because he has determined to make you his own people." The context of this promise is the wicked idolatry of Israel and their rejection of their God.

Psalms 94:14 "The Lord will not leave his people or abandon his heritage."

(delete Ezra passage).

Nehemiah 9:17 "They refused to listen and did not remember your wonders you performed among them...But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, and you did not abandon them."

Paul says, "I'm the proof that God did not abandon us nor cast us aside completely."

Paul's second reason for God not totally rejecting his kinsmen is...

2. God's pattern to save a remnant. Rom 11:2b–6 “Or don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I am the only one left, and they are trying to take my life!’” **What is a “remnant”?** The term is only used twice in the NT and here it refers to Israel. **In the Bible, this refers to elect individuals who comprise a small group within the larger community.** Examples include Noah, Joseph, the returning exiles. (Gen 45:7; 2 Kgs 19:30–31; 21:14; Ezra 9:8–15; Neh 1:1–2; Isa 10:20–22; 11:11–16; Jer 6:9; 23:3; 31:7; 40:11–15; 42:2, 15, 19; Ezek 9:8; 11:13; Amos 5:15; Mic 2:12; 5:7–8; Zeph 2:7, 9; Hag 1:12–14; Zech 8:6–12).

In Romans, the remnant consists of Jews who, like Paul, have believed on Christ and escaped the coming wrath.

For Paul, no passage better illustrates this pattern than the story of Elijah and the promise of a remnant.

The Northern Kingdom prophet Elijah faced the fury of the cruel and wicked King Ahab and his scheming wife, Jezebel.

Elijah faced off with the prophets of Baal calling them to Mount Carmel. He challenges them to call on their god so that he may send fire from the heavens to consume their altar, proving that he is the top-dog-god. During several unsuccessful attempts by Baal's prophets, Elijah taunts the false prophets by mocking and making fun of Baal's inability to light their altar. He ups the ante by soaking his altar with barrels of water—his shrine now soaked and surrounded by a trench of water.

Then, in one of the most dramatic and hair-raising scenes in the entire OT, Elijah prays and calls down fire to consume his and their altars, a fire so hot that it instantly evaporates the moat of water he'd created around the altar.

And you would think that this marvelous, undeniable miracle would result in national revival—starting with the false prophets of Baal turning in faith to the one true God. The story getting back to Ahab and Jezebel who repent in sackcloth and lead the nation in great awakening of worship and fear of the LORD?

But it doesn't. The prophets do not turn. The tyrants, Ahab and Jezebel experience no last-minute conversions. The scrooge in this story doesn't heed the warnings but just becomes more hardened and more dangerous than they ever were before. And Elijah, our hero? He runs and hides and cries out to the LORD “I have been so zealous for YHWH, the God of Armies, all these years. But the descendants of Israel have forsaken your covenant, torn down your holy altars and killed my fellow-guildsmen, the prophets by the sword, and now they seek my life as well—the only prophet—the only righteous man left.”

And God says, “Nope. I have an elect remnant—7,000 faithful worshipers who will never bow to Baal or any false god.”

Paul writes, Rom 11:5–6 “In the same way, then, there is also at the present time a remnant chosen by grace. Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise, grace ceases to be grace.” Paul himself had experienced personally what it means to be chosen in grace—God’s elect servant. And he reminds them that just as it was in Elijah’s time, God has an elect remnant from among unbelieving Jews. And this is God’s pattern to save.

The third reason given for God not rejecting his original people...

3. God’s purpose in hardening national Israel. Rom 11:7–10 “What then? Israel did not find what it was looking for, but the elect did find it (**the individuals chosen**) The *rest were hardened (the rest of the nation)*,⁸ as it is written, God *gave them a spirit of stupor*, eyes that *cannot see* and ears that *cannot hear*, to this day.⁹ And David says, ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a pitfall and a retribution to them.’¹⁰ Let their eyes be darkened so that they *cannot see*, and their backs be bent continually.’”

What is Paul driving at here? He’s reiterating a point he had made earlier in Chapter 9 regarding God hardening Pharaoh’s heart, even as Pharaoh hardened his own heart. His burden in that chapter was to provide a justification for God freely choosing to harden some and elect others (if you recall his justification was “God is God and we are not...and if some can’t accept that as a justification then people will find a way to philosophically distort or dilute this doctrine). Understand, Chapter 11 closes the loop on that topic.

Here, his burden is to apply his doctrine of election to national and ethnic Israel to show why it is that they have become cynical beyond measure. What has produced this cold and implacable heart within them regarding Jesus.

Why did God harden Israel?

- a) **So that His purpose in election might stand** (9:11 “So that God’s purpose according to election might stand—not from works but from the one who calls;” So what was that purpose that would not be thwarted or stopped by the will of man? 10:19 “I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that lacks understanding.” 11:11 “Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel jealous.” 11:14 “I magnify my ministry if I might somehow make my own people jealous and save some.” 11:32 “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may have mercy on all.” If you recall, this is according to his will, not the effort or will of man. God’s purpose in election was for them to be the vessels of salvation through whom he brought the Messiah to the nations. And that purpose was established and not foiled.

- b) Because they heard the message, understood it, but refused to believe it** (10:14 “How can they call on the one whom they have not believed in?” 10:16 “Lord, who has believed our message... Did they not hear... Did Israel not understand?” Yes. The gospel was in their prophetic books but what was the problem? 11:20 “they were broken off because of unbelief, but you stand by faith...27 And even they, if they do not remain in unbelief, will be grafted in”). God hardened their hearts because they refused to believe the message.
- c) Because despite God’s offer of salvation, they rebelled against it** (10:21 “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and defiant people.”) In the OT God repeatedly offered opportunities to repent of their rebellion—but in their disobedience, they defied God and his sovereign rule. ***Look, the more we defy God the more it hardens against God.***
- d) Because they pursued a righteousness according to works of the law instead of by faith** (9:31 “But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not achieved the righteousness of the law. Why? Because they pursued it by works apart from faith; 10:3 “since they are ignorant of the righteousness of God and attempted to establish their own righteousness, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” 11:6 “now, if by grace then it is not by works”).

By Jesus and Paul’s day, Religious Judaism won out. Their national exile in Babylon and Persia and then the series of battles with the Greeks purified their commitment to be a monotheistic people—zealous for the law—cured of their polytheism and idolatries by emphasizing this tedious, meticulous compliance with statutes and regulatory burdens. But Paul has been trying to remind them, “Listen, you forgot our story. Our story is not just about legalism and the cold, rigid application of “LAW”—it’s a story of faith. Abraham believed God and it was credited to his spiritual account as “righteousness.”

So, we must understand that national-ethnic Israel has undergone a partial hardening due to the fact that God purposed for them to do so, they failed to believe the message, they rebelled against God’s righteousness and instead pursued a righteousness according to works apart from faith. ***This has resulted in an opportunity for the Gentiles now to be brought into the family of God.***

Paul's fourth reason for believing that God has not thrown the Jews out altogether is...

4. A prophecy of their reinstatement. Rom 11:22–24, 25-27.

Paul raises the possibility that an ethnic Jewish remnant will be easily engrafted back into the “olive tree.” Note 11:23–24 “And even they, if they do not remain in unbelief, will be grafted in, because God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut off from your native wild olive tree and against nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these—the natural branches—be grafted into their own olive tree?”

Paul stresses the prospect of unbelieving Israel returning to the faith. He refers to saved Gentiles as “the wild olive branches” and the Jews as “the natural branches.” In doing so, Paul clarifies that there is only one family of God consisting of two distinct but equal branches (meaning, the Church is *not a parenthesis* in God's plan: the Church *is the plan*)—the wild branches (Gentiles) and the natural branches (ethnic Israel). He then tells us in vv. 23–24 that God could easily engraft them back into the family (provided they do not persist in unbelief).

Paul then strongly suggests that this will take place.

11:25–27 “I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you will not be conceited: A partial hardening has come upon Israel **until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.** ²⁶ And in this way **all Israel** will be saved, as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. ²⁷ And this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”

So, there are two interpretive issues we have to deal with in this text. The first is what does Paul mean by the phrase “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in”? And secondly, what does he mean in v. 26 saying “in this way, all Israel will be saved.” In what way is that going to be true?

- Because of the *future tense grammar* this looks like a prophecy about the future. Now remember, he's already said “there is presently a remnant by grace.” So it looks as though he is saying “What is happening now, some Jews believing despite the mass rejection of Jesus by our countrymen...that is going to happen again.” But when?
- *Until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in* looks like a prediction that there will be a last Gentile convert to come into the faith. Luke 21:24 “They (Jews) will be killed by the sword and be led captive into all the nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled by the **Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.**” A similar phrase here to mean “until their time is up.”

- *In this way all Israel will be saved* cannot refer to just all ethnic-Israelites, because he has already made the case that not all who are born of Abraham are the “true” or “spiritual” Israel. Both in Ch. 9 and here in 11 he has emphasized an elect *remnant* who by faith are engrafted again back into the one Olive tree—that is Christ. So “in this way” means, in this sense—God is going to regraft a remnant of ethnic Jews back into the one Spiritual family of God in Christ.

*So Paul’s point here is to say that the hardening of heart of national-ethnic Israel is **partial** (some Jews, like the apostles and Paul, trusted in Jesus at that time) and **impermanent** (some Jews will once again trust in Christ for salvation in the future, at an unspecified time).*

Summary: **God has not rejected ethnic Israel. God chose them to bring the way of salvation, by faith in Christ** and his sacrificial work on the cross, to the Jews to save them from their sins. And then through them to offer salvation to the rest of the world by faith.

Instead of receiving Jesus, and believing on his name for eternal life—they rejected their messiah, were hardened in unbelief and rebellion, and instead doubled down on their pursuit of righteousness by works of the law apart from faith.

But Paul and other Jewish Christians are evidence that God has not rejected them. God has at present time, a remnant of ethnic-national Israelites.

Paul envisions a day when God will bring a future remnant of Jews back into the olive tree—Christ. And in this sense, all of elect, spiritual, believing Israel will be saved.

Application: First, we **worship a God of mercy and justice.** We consider the kindness and severity of our God. Any so-called gospel message that only focusses on his severity in judgment is no gospel at all. Likewise, messages that only hold out hope with no reflection on the severity, the sternness in judgment of our God is equally without a gospel.

Second, ***we see that sometimes God's grace to us is a temporary exile instead of obliteration.*** Currently, unbelieving Israel has experienced exile from the promises of God in their Messiah. But God has not permanently cast them aside. And that same promise applies to us also, but so does the prospect of discipline.

Do you have people in your life who seem temporarily “cut off” and disciplined in their rebellion? Pray for them, continue to hold out an “olive branch” to them, reminding them of God’s great love, his mercy and his severity.