

Romans 11: The Restoration of Israel...

“I ask, then, has God rejected his people?” (v 1) – Paul’s question at this point in his letter makes sense. If Israel’s rejection of the gospel was consistent both with God’s eternal plan (Romans 9 v 1 to 29) and Israel’s own choice (Romans 9 v 30 to 10 v 21), then does this mean that Israel’s fate is now settled and there is no possibility of restoration? “By no means!” (v 1) – despite its present state, Israel has not been permanently cast away, as Paul will proceed to explain in this chapter...

Israel and the remnant (Romans 11 v 1 to 10)

Paul knows that as a whole Israel had rejected their Messiah. Yet a substantial ‘remnant’ embraced the Gospel. Paul reminds us that God has often worked in Israel through a faithful remnant (as he did in the time of Elijah). We often think God needs a lot of people to do a great work, but he often works through a small group. Though not many Jews believed in Jesus in Paul’s day, God would use that small group (the Early Church) in a big way...

- The remnant was “chosen by grace” (v 5). What is the difference between “grace” and “works” (v 6)? Can they ever go together? What did the majority of Israel fail to obtain (v 7)? Why? Who obtained it, and what happened to the rest?

The quotations from Isaiah 29 v 10 and Psalm 69 v 22 and 23 tell us that God can give certain people a “spirit of stupor” (i.e. a spirit of deadness toward spiritual things) and eyes that are darkened. It seems that God is choosing to enlighten only a ‘remnant’ of Israel at the present time.

God’s plan in saving the remnant (Romans 11 v 11 to 24)

- How does Paul show that God had a specific purpose in allowing Israel to stumble? What was that purpose (v 11)? Paul shows that God is still working through a remnant of Israel today, but wants to make it clear that the unbelieving majority of Israel is not lost forever. Israel’s failure meant “riches for the Gentiles” (v 12) – remember the many instances the Gospel only went to the Gentiles after the Jewish people had rejected it (see Acts 13 v 46; Acts 18 v 5, 6; Acts 28 v 25 to 28). Jewish rejection of the Gospel meant more opportunity for preaching to Gentiles – and many took advantage of this. Paul’s objective was to make his fellow Jews “jealous” (v 14) by showing them the attractiveness of the Christian message. But how have Christians generally treated Jews historically?

“First-fruits” (v 16) probably refers to the first Christian converts, who were Jewish. Remember that all of the apostles and most of the New Testament authors were Jews. If the conversion of this ‘first-fruit’ was good for the Gentiles, how much better it will be when the full harvest is brought in! When an old olive tree had lost its vigour (v 17), one remedy in ancient times was to cut away the dying branches and graft in some wild olive shoots – resulting in rejuvenation of the tree. Here Paul is reminding the Gentile Christians that it is only by God’s grace that they can be grafted into the “olive tree” of God, the “root” of which is Israel...

- As Christians, should we think of ourselves as superior to Jews (v 18)? What should our attitude be (v 20)? What causes branches to be “broken off” or “grafted in” (v 19, 20)? Is it a question of what we deserve? What are we instructed to do (v 22)?

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- “God has the power to graft them in again” (v 23) – under what conditions can Jews be reconciled to God? In these verses, how does Paul refute the argument that the Gospel has now passed over to the Gentiles, and there is therefore no future for Israel? If Gentiles seem to be grafted into God's olive tree easily, we can be sure that it won't be hard for God to graft the “natural branches” (v 24) back into the tree. What sort of fruit do you think these natural branches will bear?

God's plan for Israel includes their ultimate restoration (Romans 11 v 25 to 36)

- Verse 25 is the *key* to Chapters 9 to 11! “Partial hardening” or blindness has come upon Israel – the majority of Jews have rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Why? Permanently? Notice the key word “*until*” (and compare with Hosea 5 v 15): “*the fullness of the Gentiles*”, which translates the Greek phrase to *πληρωμα των εθνων* (*to pleroma ton ethnon*, literally ‘the full measure (number?) of the nations’) “*has come in*”. The hardness will not last forever – the day will come when the majority of Jews will realise their blindness and folly; they will acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, and the glorious restoration of Israel will usher in the Kingdom Age. Remember, this is a “mystery”...

What does verse 26 say about the nation of Israel? Note Paul is not talking about ‘spiritual Israel’. This verse clearly states that God is *not* finished with Israel (as a distinct, ethnic nation). Although at present God has turned the focus of his saving mercy away from Israel, and on to the largely Gentile Church, one day he will turn it back again. This passage refutes those who insist that God is forever done with Israel, and that the Church is the new Israel and inherits every promise made in the Old Testament (e.g. Genesis 13 v 15, 17 v 7, 8). The Bible teaches that this is a necessary condition for the return of Christ, i.e. God turns the focus of his saving grace upon Israel, and Israel responds by believing in Jesus (see Zechariah 12 v 10, 11; Matthew 23 v 37 to 39). The quotations from Isaiah (v 26, 27) show that God still has a redeeming work to accomplish with Israel, and this work will not be left incomplete...

- How do verses 28 and 29 show that God’s love for Israel, and his calling of them, endures? Remember God’s covenant promises to Abraham and the patriarchs were unconditional and therefore “irrevocable” (Genesis 12 v 1 to 3).
- What note of caution does Paul sound in v 30 to 32? How many of us have sinned (Romans 3 v 23)? Does anyone deserve God’s mercy and salvation? If God could use Israel’s disobedience for the good of Gentiles, then he can use the mercy he has shown to Gentiles for Israel’s salvation.
- Paul breaks into spontaneous praise (v 33) – why? Who could have planned the whole story of Israel, the Gentile nations and the Church as God planned it? Yet we can see the great wisdom and compassion in his plan. The quotations from Isaiah 40 v 13 and Job 41 v 11 emphasise both God’s wisdom and his sovereignty. God is no one’s debtor.
- Verse 36 sums it up: *from him* – the plan of salvation came from God (it wasn’t our idea); *through him* – salvation comes through the great work of Jesus on the cross on our behalf; and *to him* – ultimately all praise, honour and glory go to God, and we find our fulfilment in living “to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1 v 12)...

Prayer:

*Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan,
Oh, the grace that brought it down to man,
Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span – at Calvary!*

*Mercy there was great and grace was free,
Pardon there was multiplied to me,
There my sinful heart found liberty – at Calvary!*