

“God in the Ruins”
Romans 11:1-10
May 28, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

Where is God when everything seems to be falling apart? This was a question on the minds of Jewish Christians in Paul’s day. For centuries, the nation had been suffering a time of decline, even as they were looking forward to the coming of their Messiah as the solution to their decline. But when their Messiah did come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, he was rejected by the majority of his fellow Jews. It seemed to these Jewish Christians that their world was falling apart. This was not just a national crisis, but a spiritual one as well. Had God not promised Israel that he would never forsake them? He had promised through the prophet Samuel, **“For the Lord will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself”** (1 Sam. 12:22). Didn’t he tell Abraham that he was making with him an “everlasting covenant” (Gen. 17:7)? Contrary to his promises, has God rejected his people? From the perspective of Jewish Christians, it certainly seemed that he had.

This is the problem Paul addresses in Romans 11. In the first ten verses of the chapter, he answers the question posed in verse 1: **“Has God rejected his people?”** His answer is going to be that their rejection is only partial, because he has reserved for himself a believing remnant. The last half of the chapter seeks to answer the question of whether their stumble is permanent. His answer to that question is that it is only temporary. John Stott summarizes this chapter as follows: “There is still an Israelite remnant in the present, and there is going to be an Israelite recovery in the future, which will itself lead to blessing for the whole world.”

What is the relevance of this passage to us? I’m guessing that very few of us lose any sleep over the national and spiritual crisis felt by first century Jewish Christians. We do have something in common with them, however, and it is something that we have either all experienced or will likely experience. Where is God when everything seems to be falling apart? At the current moment, we are experiencing a decline of Christianity in our nation. The tide of secularism is rising, and church attendance is declining. When it comes to religious affiliation, the fastest growing demographic is the “None” category of those who express no religious affiliation. Proponents of biblical standards of sexual morality are declining in number and are seen as either relics of outdated beliefs or as something more sinister, as those who hate their neighbor for bigoted reasons.

The relevance of this passage may also be personal for you. Perhaps you are feeling that the wheels are falling off, that nothing is going according to plan. Perhaps you are wondering what happened to God's promises to you to be your loving heavenly Father who answers your prayers. Today's passage provides us with a helpful perspective on what is happening when it seems that the wheels are falling off.

I. God Is Preserving His People – v. 1-6

Paul emphatically rejects the idea that God has rejected his people, and he offers an alternative explanation for the tragedy of Israel that is being played out before them. Paul finds the explanation in the Old Testament idea of the remnant. This is one of the common Old Testament explanations for how God would both judge the nation for their rebellion while also being faithful to his promise never to forsake his people. God would make sure to preserve a faithful remnant from his people. You see this in the well-known metaphor from Isaiah 11:1. **“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.”** Divine judgment will come as the mighty tree of Israel is cut down and nothing but a stump remains. But there will still be life in roots, and a shoot will come forth. This speaks of Israel's remnant, and Isaiah applies it specifically to Jesus. He is the shoot that will bear fruit.

Paul sees evidence of this remnant in his own life. He is a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. Though he was part of unbelieving Israel, God had mercy on him and brought him to faith in Christ. He is part of Israel's remnant. Paul is evidence that **“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew”** (v. 2). As we saw in chapter 8, this foreknowledge is not just God's knowledge of something before it happens. Rather, it is God's election of Israel as a nation. Israel is God's chosen people.

Paul next takes us to an event from the life of Elijah to explain about this remnant. Elijah was a prophet during the reign of one of Israel's evil kings. King Ahab had married a Canaanite woman named Jezebel, and she was zealous to institute Baal worship in Israel. Ahab's normal response to his wife was one of passivity, so he basically went along with her idolatrous ambitions. As part of her efforts to establish Baal worship, she actively undertook an effort to kill the Lord's prophets. God sent his judgment upon Israel in the form of a drought. The drought ended in that famous contest on Mt. Carmel between the prophets of Baal and Elijah. Each was to erect an altar and call on their God to send fire to consume the offering. When Baal's prophets were unsuccessful, Elijah called on the Lord and he sent his fire to the altar. After that, the people rallied behind Elijah and killed the prophets of Baal. With the false prophets appropriately removed, Elijah calls on God to lift his judgment and send rain, which he does. Ahab was present for this, but Jezebel was not. When Ahab

tells his wife of these events, she orders a message to be sent to Elijah. **“So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them [namely, the slain prophets of Baal] by this time tomorrow”** (1 Kings 19:2).

Elijah responds to this threat with fear and flees to a cave where he makes the statement found in our text. **“Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”** (v. 3). The text in 1 Kings makes it clear that Elijah’s statement came from a heart of despair. He was in such despair that he wanted to die (1 Kings 19:4). Just as was the case with the Jewish Christians Paul is addressing in our text, Elijah felt as if everything was falling apart. The rulers of Israel, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, were actively promoting Baal worship and actively seeking to eradicate the worship of Jehovah. It seemed to him that all was lost. The thing to which he had given his life, the true worship of Jehovah, seemed a lost cause.

What does God say to Elijah? **“I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal”** (v. 4). This wasn’t merely an interesting historical event, but also had relevance for Paul’s time. **“So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace”** (v. 5). The faithful remnant in Paul’s day, just as in Elijah’s day, were chosen by grace and not works. That means that God was at work, preserving a people for himself. By definition, to be a remnant means that you are in the minority. And to be in the minority means that you are going to have to swim against the current. No one is able to do that apart from the grace of God at work in one’s life.

Two applications of this come to mind. First, the kind of despair Elijah was experiencing is never the appropriate response to times of difficulty. I see two common features of despair in this passage. The first is to magnify the opposition through the use of this vague term, “they.” Did you pick up on that in Elijah’s complaint? *“They* have killed your prophets, *they* have demolished your altars,...and *they* seek my life.” The imprecise nature of this “they” makes the enemy feel ubiquitous and frightening. It’s just this amorphous, vague, evil force before which I am a helpless victim. The second feature of despair is the proud unbelief that assumes knowledge of everything God is doing. Elijah assumed that because he was the only faithful one he knew that was left, that he was in fact the only one left. If Elijah didn’t know about it, then God wasn’t doing it. God sets him straight by telling him that God was indeed at work in ways Elijah didn’t know. He had kept 7000 faithful men and women, 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Just because we don’t know of something doesn’t mean that it’s not happening. God is always doing things we’re not aware of.

After the passing of Tim Keller last week, someone in my hearing was voicing the great loss this is to the church. They went on to say, “There will

never be another Tim Keller.” His loss is indeed a great one, but we don’t know who God might raise up. God is always doing things for the good of his people that we don’t know about. That’s why we trust him, walking by faith and not by sight.

A second application this passage brings to mind is to remember that there is always a way forward. This is the truth able to lift us out of despair. As Paul is going to say in the rest of the chapter, the way forward in this case is the fullness of the Gentiles. Only a remnant of believing Jews was left in Israel, but this led to a time of fullness for Gentiles, as people from all nations come to know Jesus. This may not be the way forward envisioned by believing Jews, but it was the way forward that God had appointed. Despair is the opposite of hope in that it assumes there is no viable way forward. We’re stuck with no possibility of a good outcome. But by faith we know that there is always a way forward. Just because you may not see that way forward doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. We simply trust that God has it in mind and will provide it at the appropriate time. In the meantime, we live each day in hope and trust.

II. God Is Hardening His Enemies – v. 7-10

These verses answer the question of why there was only a small remnant of believing Jews. In other words, why were there so many Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah? Paul declares in verse 7 that Israel failed to obtain the righteousness they were seeking because they sought it by works. But the elect did obtain it through faith in Christ, while the rest were hardened. The rest of these verses then speak of this hardening. How do we explain the fact that there are so many in the first century, and so many in the 21st century, who fail to obtain the salvation, peace and joy promised by the gospel?

Paul explains the proliferation of unbelief by this word “hardening.” The Bible’s general teaching on hardening is that the hardening from God is in response to man’s hardening of his own heart. We saw that back in chapter 1, where God gives people over to follow their own desires. Since their desires are to worship creation instead of the Creator, God gives them what they want. Tragically, it leads to their destruction. Ultimate judgment fits this category as well. The only people in hell are the people who want to be there. They want to be there because they have chosen a life that is independent of God, and hell is the name of that place where they can find such a life. Another example of hardening is that of Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. The text says several times that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, while saying at other times that God hardened his heart. One thing the Bible doesn’t teach is that there are people who want to know and worship the true God, but God says they can’t and hardens their heart.

It is helpful for us to know about the process of hardening so that we can be warned against it. This speaks to one of the common features of our fallen condition. We try to exert control over things we can't control, while failing to control those things we should control. Elijah fell into despair when he tried to control the circumstances around Baal worship in Israel. He complained about wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. We often do the same, and this is what often leads to our despair. But there are things we can control, and the response of our heart to God is one of those things.

Verse 8 reports God's response to Israel's unbelief. **"God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."** Note the irony that though they had eyes, they would not see, and though they had ears they would not hear. The language implies a willful stubbornness at the heart of their blindness and deafness. There is a beautiful old church a couple of blocks from where our son and his family live in West Philadelphia. There was a report last week that this church was renovating their facility and decided to remove the original two rose windows on either side of their sanctuary. They sold the windows, as well as a number of other old items in the church, to a salvager for \$6000. He decided to take the windows to Freeman Auction House in Philadelphia, and the experts there realized that these windows were rare and beautiful Tiffany windows. They sold at auction the next week for over \$100,000 each. For years, people had been looking at these windows as nothing more than old, worn windows. They had eyes to see, but didn't really "see" what they were looking at.

How often is this the sad case with those who come to church week in and week out? They see and hear of the most exquisitely beautiful being in the universe. They hear of the love and grace of the Lord Jesus who in love gave himself for his people. They hear of his call to live a life of love that makes a real difference. And all they can think about is when the service is going to end so they can do what they want to do.

The next verse from the Old Testament is from Psalm 69, where David is praying about his enemies. **"Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them."** The table here is probably a symbol for the security and joy of home. It is a good gift from God that becomes a source of harm and trouble. For those apart from Christ, even God's good gifts turn out to bring trouble.

CONCLUSION:

Is there some area in your life now where you are battling despair? Remember God's promise. He is for you and will provide a way forward for you. He has demonstrated that he is for you through Christ, sending his Son to live for you and to die for you.