

Spiritual Blindness

Okay, before we get started on the lesson for this evening, let us do a quick recap of what we talked about last week so we can get a good feel for where we are in Romans and what Paul's line of thinking is up to this point and through verse 10. So, let us read verses 1-6 really quick just so we can have it fresh in our minds:

“I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? Far from it! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in *the passage about Elijah*, how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ “Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” ⁴ But what is the divine response to him? “I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵ In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to *God's* gracious choice. ⁶ But if *it is* by grace, *it is* no longer on the basis of works, since *otherwise* grace is no longer grace.” (Romans 11:1-6)

Briefly, to sum this up, we see Paul saying that God has not completely rejected the nation of Israel and he gives two examples. The first one being himself, for he, Paul, is an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin and he is saved, so not all of Israel is lost. He also, to strengthen his argument, uses an example from the OT that his readers would have been very familiar with; this example being that of Elijah in verses 2-5. The remnant that God had left when Elijah thought he was the only man of God left, but God told him that He had seven thousand that remained faithful and did not worship the false gods. The message of Romans 11 is that the promises to Israel are not cancelled and Israel will be brought back. Paul is letting us know three things about Israel: that they are set aside **partially**, there is always a remnant, **temporarily**, they will be brought back, and **purposefully**, they are set aside to fulfill God's sovereign plan. To further solidify this fact that the nation of Israel is still God's chosen nation, we can look at Jeremiah 31:35-37:

³⁵ This is what the Lord says,
He who gives the sun for light by day
And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
The Lord of armies is His name:

³⁶ “If this fixed order departs
From Me,” declares the Lord,
“Then the descendants of Israel also will cease
To be a nation before Me forever.”

³⁷ This is what the Lord says:
“If the heavens above can be measured
And the foundations of the earth searched out below,
Then I will also reject all the descendants of Israel
For everything that they have done,” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 31:35-37)

What these verses are saying is basically, that when God loses control of His creation, then Israel will cease to be His people. Now, we learned this morning in Sunday school that God in His fullness is fully present in the universe, existing within and sustaining His creation. So, we know that in order for the “fixed order” of creation to depart from the Lord, He himself would have to cease to exist. The rejection and disobedience that Israel showed toward God through the years does not and will not alter this promise. God does not change according to our behavior; we change according to Him. So, to put it another way, as long as God is God, Israel will be His people.

And lastly in verse 6 we see the two concepts of grace and works. These two things being, of course, mutually exclusive. Grace, by definition, is unearned not to mention undeserved. Paul lays it out relatively simply by saying it is either one or the other. Grace or works. Our only hope is grace, “⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this *is* not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

One last thing about grace vs. works before we move on to the portion of Romans that we are actually talking about tonight. Let us think for a second about what it would mean if we were saved and let into heaven based upon our own works. What would it look like when we got to heaven? We would be praised; the angels would praise us saying how great of a job we did while on earth. What is the problem with that? Where is the glory for God in that? It is nowhere! Our whole purpose in creation is to bring glory to God. By him being gracious and saving His elect, He receives all the glory and we are left humbled and in awe of Him, with no capacity to do anything but worship His holy name.

Now let’s read our passage for tonight:

“⁷What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; ⁸just as it is written:

‘GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR,
EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT,
DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY.’

⁹And David says,

‘MAY THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP,
AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM.
¹⁰MAY THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT,
AND BEND THEIR BACKS CONTINUALLY.’” (Romans 11:7-10)

As we come to these next four verses, what we are going to do is simply step through each one and see what Paul is saying to us here, making sure to keep in mind the context of where we are in Romans and what we just got done talking about, specifically in the last two chapters.

But first, a fun little back and forth (Boice’s Jew vs. Gentile story):

Okay, verse 7:

“What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened;”

Paul starts off this verse with a rhetorical question, as he loves to do, and immediately answers it. His question of, “what then?” in verse 7 is basically his way of saying, “to sum it all up.” He has given a lot of information about election, predestination, and Israel as a whole, so he is now going to do a quick summary of all of that before moving on (**no child left behind**). He has been building his argument against this idea of Israel being totally set aside and sums it up very succinctly in these next few verses.

The first thing to look at in this verse is, what was Israel seeking? Well Paul has mentioned this throughout the entire epistle to the Romans, but we can just take a look back at the end of chapter 9. It reads as follows, “however, Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law.” So, they were seeking a law of righteousness. But why didn’t they obtain it? Jump back to Romans 9, next verse, verse 32, “Why? Because *they did* not *pursue it* by faith, but as though *they could* by works.” The Jews, the Pharisees, were very self-righteous, seeking salvation as a result of their own works, rather than through grace by faith (Ephesians 2). Paul has been reiterating this point since the beginning. We saw in chapter 3 of Romans the example he used with Abraham to show that even in Abraham’s day, people were saved by faith and nothing has changed henceforth. Why? Because God does not change. God did not, is not, nor will He ever change the mode in which we are saved.

Let’s keep it going, shall we? So, if Israel did not obtain it, then who did? Let us keep reading, “but those who were chosen obtained it,” okay so now we need to ask, who are the chosen, or some translations say the elect, or election? The elect here is not referencing the entire nation of Israel, but rather those of Israel that were living faithfully and not seeking righteousness by their own works. Although Israel is God’s chosen people, not all of Israel is of the election, which is what Paul has been saying this whole time. In Romans 9, “For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel.” The children of the promise, those who have received circumcision of the heart rather than of the flesh; those who sought righteousness through faith rather than through the law. Israel has been set aside partially, temporarily, and purposefully (MacArthur), but not all of Israel sought after their own righteousness and that remnant has a purpose in God’s sovereign plan and Israel will still have their day just as the Lord has promised. The elect are those that God graciously chose, which resulted in them turning from their own man made traditions and finding His righteousness through the true knowledge of His Word. Belief in Christ as Lord and Savior ends the sinner’s futile quest for perfect attempts to save him or herself by efforts to obey the law. The law makes our sin known to us, but has no power to save us. Only through Christ are we saved. Israel, as a whole, continuously sought to be right with God, but failed over and over because they sought according to their own standards, rather than the standards that God clearly provided for them. So, the Lord is giving them what they justly deserve, because remember, there is no injustice with God (Romans 9:14).

They earnestly sought, zealously even, but could not find. Ch. 10 v.2, do you remember? It says that they had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, but rather according to their own self established righteousness. This just emphasizes the need for us to be in the Word. Constantly learning about God, obtaining that true knowledge, or epignosis, that Harrison talked about when we went over that portion of scripture in chapter 10. Take a look, Romans 10, “² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. ³ For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.” (Romans 10:2-3). It is not okay to just read the bible and follow the commandments. We need to know who Jesus is and what He did for us and what it really means when we look at His sacrificial death on the cross. The Jews did not get this. They even saw Jesus in the flesh and saw the miracles He was performing in front of their very eyes and they still rejected Him. Rejected Him to the point of putting Him to death! This is the blindness that Paul is speaking of in verse 8. They were unable to see that Jesus is Lord due to God’s blinding of them because of their continual and willful disobedience throughout history. But some did subject themselves to the righteousness of God, and those are the elect or chosen that Paul is speaking of here.

Great. Last section of this verse, let us take a look, “and the rest were hardened;” Okay, so we know about hardening, right? We have seen this before; Paul uses probably the most well-known example of pharaoh having his heart hardened by God. Harrison discussed what that meant when we went through that portion of chapter 9 and I am sure all of you remember exactly what he said, and are experts on the subject now, so I don’t need to go into any further detail about it. But what I will say about it is this: when God hardens someone’s heart it is a result of an ongoing and willful rejection of true righteousness. It is not a spontaneous thing that God just randomly does. He is allowing the sinner to become a slave to their sin because of their willful rejection of His Word.

MacArthur describes hardening as, “the judgment of God on a person through the fault of that person.” “[Israel is] hardened judicially because they have chosen to reject willfully.”

“When God moves in with judicial, final, judgmental, condemning, hardening of the heart, it is as a result and response to a continual process of willful rejection. It is a judicial thing that comes to those who continue to reject, who continue to reject, who continue to reject.”

(MacArthur)

So, in the context of this verse specifically, if the chosen are those who believed and were saved by faith, then the rest must be the portion of Israel who were NOT faithful and tried to obtain righteousness on their own. We will talk more about this hardening in a second, but for now, that is what we need to take from this verse.

Instagram video example.

To sum up that first verse quickly before moving on, we can say: Israel as a nation sought righteousness, but as a whole, the nation did not obtain it. Rather, those who sought righteousness based off the knowledge of God, the remnant, did, and the rest were left hardened.

Let us step down to verse 8, “just as it is written:

“GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR,
EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT,
DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY.”

Very important to realize what Paul is doing here. So, back at the end of chapter 10 we see Paul quoting from the Old Testament using references from both Moses and Isaiah; the law and the prophets. Here, we see him do the same thing but instead of quoting them separately, he combines them, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of course, into one well-crafted statement to show everyone that he is not just making this stuff up.

“For the Lord has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep,
He has shut your eyes—the prophets;
And He has covered your heads—the seers.” (Isaiah 29:10)

“Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.”
(Deuteronomy 29:4)

It was determined long ago that God would partially and temporarily set aside the nation of Israel and that they would not have the capacity to respond to the Gospel because of their prior unbelief and unfaithfulness, which led to the hardening of their hearts by God. God solidified the unbelief that was already present in their hearts because of their continual efforts to find their own way to salvation. Also, it is important to see here that the action is being performed by God. GOD gave them... God gives His elect eyes to see and ears to hear and understand His Word, as well as a heart to accept and believe His truths. But on the flip side, those that are not chosen by God, and who willfully reject His Word, are blinded.

On this topic R.C. Sproul says, “They did not want to see the things of God, so He abandoned them to their sinful desire...If you do not want to hear the Word of God, be careful, because God will make you deaf, and then you will never hear it.” (*Romans*, Sproul, p. 336)

We can see some of the examples of this blinding with how the pharisees reacted to Jesus’ parables vs. how the disciples responded.

“¹⁰ And the disciples came up and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ And Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. ¹² For whoever has, to him *more* shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. ¹³ Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

‘YOU SHALL KEEP ON LISTENING, BUT SHALL NOT UNDERSTAND;
AND YOU SHALL KEEP ON LOOKING, BUT SHALL NOT PERCEIVE;
¹⁵ FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,

AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART, AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.” (Matthew 13:10-15)

It is only by the grace of God that we have been chosen and are able to seek righteousness through His Son. You're sensible people! You can see that we should never for a second take that for granted. It's no small gift from God to be chosen to spend eternity with Him in heaven. Cherish it. Use it as fuel to increase your zeal for the knowledge of Him, the Knowledge of the Holy (Sunday School plug).

Okay, verses 9 and 10: “And David says,

‘MAY THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP,
AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM.
10 MAY THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT,
AND BEND THEIR BACKS CONTINUALLY.’”

“²² May their table before them become a snare;
And when they are at peace, *may it become* a trap.
²³ May their eyes grow dim so that they cannot see,
And make their hips shake continually.” (Psalm 69:22-23)

A person's table was thought to be a place of safety, something familiar and comforting. So, what is this place of safety that has become a trap? It is the promises that Paul lists in the beginning of chapter 9 verses 4 and 5, “the adoption as sons; ...the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.” The promises and blessings that God gave to the nation of Israel ironically became the very trap/snare that caused their downfall and their hardening.

“Luther describes Psalm 69:22 as being like a flower in the field whose nectar is used to make honey for the bee, but the nectar is poison to the spider. To those who are perishing, the Word is poison. May it be for you nothing but sweetness and honey so that you may feast on the table God has prepared for the foundation of the world.” (*Romans*, Sproul, p. 337)

This example just illustrates the fact that the exact same substance can prove to be dangerous to one person, while on the other hand being a necessity of life for another. This is true for God's Word. Without the true knowledge of God, we are dead. Worse than dead! Our whole point of existence is to glorify God, so by choosing not to obey Him, our lives become pointless and we are left with no hope for what lies beyond this life.

The point of these last two verses is that if you take God's word and try to form it to fit into your own lifestyle and into your own way of thinking, and totally disregard what His word clearly teaches, then it will become worse than worthless to you. It will become a curse and the ultimate cause of your hardening and difficulty and suffering in this life and the next. Matthew 11:29-30, “²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you

will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light. ” Who better to hear it from than Jesus? We know 100% that if we truly, in our hearts, believe and follow Jesus, then our eyes will **not** be darkened and our backs will **not** bend continually, but we will be blessed by our Father in heaven. And any burden we bear on earth will be forgotten in heaven when we enter into God’s glory.

So, what then? To sum up Paul’s summing up of his own summary. The nation of Israel has not been abandoned by God, for if that were true, that would make God a liar. God has always kept a remnant for Himself and that remnant Has been saved by grace through faith. There is no other way to heaven. A portion of Israel has been set aside for a time, but God is faithful, and when the predetermined time comes for Him to redeem Israel, the world will know.

A few takeaways from this lesson:

God is unchanging and never goes back on His promises. What He has revealed to us in His word is the ultimate unchanging truth and should be a great source of assurance for us to know that He has a plan for all of us and all we need to do is trust Him and follow His Word. There are no secrets in that area, folks.

Also, it is important to remember, since we have been talking about the Jews seeking after God, but seeking Him according to their own ideas rather than through the knowledge of God. We need to know God. It isn’t an option; it is a command. How are we supposed to worship and love and follow and share Him with others if we don’t know Him intimately? We should strive not to be “workers of lawlessness” but rather “good and faithful servants.”

Lastly. Know the Word in order to protect yourselves against false teachers...