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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: Seeking But Not Finding

Transcribed Message
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Romans 11:7-10

It would be very appropriate this morning as we turn to Romans 11 verses 7 to 10 to begin by letting our eyes fall down to verse 33 where Paul reminds us of the great wisdom of God where he says in that 33rd verse "O, the depth both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out." We'll get to that verse in due time. But it is a verse that is appropriate this morning because in verses 7 through 10 of Romans 11, we have verses that are hard to teach. We have verses that are hard to understand. Maybe we have verses that are hard to accept. One writer suggested that if the apostle Paul was penning this letter today, there would no doubt be an editorial committee from any number of churches who would ask Him to soften these words and make a few revisions and make it a little bit more palatable and acceptable to us. It seems to me whenever we come to passages like this in the Bible, and there are not a few, there will be more even as we go through this 11th chapter.

It seems that we can take a couple of different approaches. We can come to a passage like this and we can see it as the word of God. We can say God, this is your revelation to us by Your Spirit, under the inspiration of the Spirit You have given it to us and we are going to accept it as best we can, to understand it as best we can, and submit our hearts to it as best we can. I guess another way that we could approach it is to find a way to make it say what it doesn't seem to be saying, to make it say something that again is a little softer and a little more acceptable to us. We're going to try to follow the path number one this morning – to say this is God's revelation to us, and as hard as it is to step into some of these things, we are going to step into it with the understanding that this is God's will and His word for us. In these verses this morning, the only righteousness that counts with God is the righteousness that He provides when we put our faith in Christ alone. It is a wonderful truth. The very righteousness that God

requires is the righteousness that He provides, and that is the only righteousness that He accepts.

We look first at this matter of hardened or chosen. Hardened or chosen. It begins in verse 7 with a very simple, straightforward summary statement. Paul says: "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened." Verse 7 is not an introduction of new material. Verse 7 is not bringing us new subject matter. Verse 7 is introduced with those first two words "what then". If we were writing a paraphrase of this verse this morning, those first two little words "what then", we might very well write something like this: let me remind you of what I've already said. What then is Paul's way of saying let me just remind you of what I've already said. Let me take you back to chapter 9. Let me take you back to chapter 10. Let me take you back to the opening of chapter 11. That's what he's doing in verse 7. He's giving us a summary statement of everything that he has said in these critical chapters 9,10, and 11. I'm going to begin by just stepping into those truths with you.

There are three truths that we need to review. We go back to chapter 9. Remember chapter 9 was about the doctrine of election. Election is God's sovereign purposes in choosing those whom He will save. That is the 9th chapter in a nutshell. It is taking us back to Israel's past. To Israel's past. In the 9th chapter, we're not surprised that Paul takes us all the way back to Abraham. He takes us to Jacob, to Esau. He quotes a lot from Isaiah. It's all about Israel's past and the choices that God has made with regard to them.

Chapter 10. Paul says what then. Let me remind you about chapter 10. Chapter 10 then is the flipside of this, if you will. It's all about human responsibility. Paul is clear that when he has just taught what he did about election in chapter 9 and then when you get to chapter 10 he is not going to let anybody say okay, the doctrine of election means I have no responsibility before God. He specifically steps into that and says no. no one will say in light of what I just taught in chapter 9 that this isn't fair. We may say it, but Paul says no, there is human responsibility. Somehow in this mystery of God's divine election and purposes He does not in any way eliminate our need to believe. Our need to step in and exercise faith and to put our trust in Christ. He goes back and is talking now in chapter 10 about Israel's present. Remember what he said. The word is near. It's

right there for them. Remember, he said, they've heard it. They've understood it but they've rejected it. They haven't believed it. He closed out that 10th chapter with that sobering almost painful 21st verse: "But of Israel He says, 'All day long I have held out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'"

Then he said let me remind you about chapter 11. Those first six verses that we looked at last Sunday is all about the fact that God is still at work. God is still at work. Now he is stepping in to Israel's future. Chapter 9 is a snapshot of Israel's past. Chapter 10 is a snapshot of Israel's present. Chapter 11 takes us to Israel's future. The point that we emphasized last Sunday was nothing that has happened to this point with regard to God's relationship to His chosen people has in any way, shape, or form been a surprise to God. There's nothing that caused Him to say I did not see this coming. Plan A, I am going to have to set you aside, and plan B move front and center. No, that's not, Paul says, what happened. In all of this, Paul is grappling with this fundamental question that we have raised and talked about for weeks and literally all through these chapters.

It is that question that he raises at the beginning of this 11th chapter. I ask then, has God rejected His people? What about Israel? What about the Jewish people, Paul? This does not seem that the gospel is being received and welcomed by the Jewish people. I see Gentiles believing and trusting Christ all over the place. I don't see that happening among the Jews. Has God in some respect rejected His people? That's the question Paul keeps answering for us.

Look again at verse 7. In verse 7, we have three groups that we need to identify. Three groups in that 7th verse. The first he identifies for us as Israel. "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking." This initial group that is being referenced is the whole nation. If we were to look at a diagram of a circle, we would just simply say this circle represents Israel. This represents the chosen people of God. All of these within this sphere, all ethnic Jews, all of those are the ones that God through Abraham has called to be His chosen people. That group is identified here. He acknowledges in this opening statement the truth of Amos 3:2 which we mentioned last Sunday. When God says Israel, of all the nations of the earth, you only have I known. Today in 2022 I'm told there's 195 nation/states in the world. I don't know what that number was when Amos wrote his prophecy, but whatever that number was, I assure you God knew every one of

those nations. He knew exactly how many there were. When he says in Amos 3:2 you only have I known of all the nations of the earth, He is talking about the fact that they're the only ones that are in that circle. They're the only chosen ones. It is the national entity of Israel and the Jewish people that God has chosen to be a light to the world. That is the storyline of the whole Old Testament. It is simply underscoring the truth of Deuteronomy 7:6 when God says you are a special people to Me. Of all the peoples of the earth, you are a special people. He said that to Abraham's descendants. That's the corporate whole. Israel is identified first.

The second group he calls the elect. "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it." The elect, in other words, is simply the chosen. The chosen. We've seen this before. Chapter 9 verse 11: "Though they were not yet born (talking about Jacob and Esau) 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." He has already referenced that. We saw in chapter 11 in verse 2 God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew, whom He has set His love upon, whom He has prepared and chosen for a special purpose. Then again at verse 5: "So too at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace." Now we look at the circle and within the circle, there is another circle. The other circle within the circle is now referenced as the remnant, as the chosen, as the elect ones. That's the second group.

The third group he identifies simply as the rest at the end of that 7th verse. "...but the rest were hardened." Who are we going to identify as the rest? The rest are those not chosen. They are Israelites. They are Jews, but they're not chosen. They're not a part of the elect. They're not a part of the remnant. They're not in a smaller circle. They're in the larger circle of the corporate entity of the nation of Israel, but they're not in the smaller one. In the 9th chapter and verse 32 you remember Paul spoke of what was happening in that regard. "Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They had stumbled over the stumbling stone." Who has stumbled over the stumbling stone? The rest. The rest have stumbled over the stumbling stone.

Having seen this snapshot of Israel as to their past, present, and future, having seen the three groups identified, now let's step into what Paul says about the outcomes of each of these groups and what he identifies in this 7th verse as what happens. I'm

going to just take one word and link one word with each of these groups. One descriptor that comes out of the text that tells us the outcome of each of these groups. The first one is in reference to Israel, this chosen people of God, the nation of Israel as a group. Paul tells us that the word that is linked by way of outcome with that group is the word "failure". "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking." What do you want to know when you hear that? Israel failed to obtain what? What was Israel seeking that they failed to obtain? The answer is something good. The answer is something that everybody should be striving for, should be wanting, desiring, to be seeking. It is a right standing before God. Israel was seeking justification before God in some form. They wanted acceptance by God. That's what they were pursuing. They wanted God's acceptance. They wanted to be in right standing before God. What a wonderful thing to be pursuing. What a wonderful thing to be striving after.

Again, if I were to say to you, think of people within your circle of friends, schoolmates, family, coworkers, and you could put into a category each of those people. You could say of them in reference to this matter of seeking after God I would imagine there would be those within that company of people that you would say as I look at their life I don't see anything at all that suggests that they're concerned about anything spiritual. There's nothing that ever indicates in a conversation that they care at all about God or His influence or involvement in their life on any level. They're just living life for this world and for themselves. Then you'd probably say there's a group of people that they are at times seeking after God. They go to church on Christmas and Easter. When they run into some difficulty in their life they might even say to me I know you're a Christian. I know you have a relationship with God. Would you pray for me about this? Every so often they give a little indication that there is an interest. Then there are people obviously who are very interested and who are pursuing. You look at those things and here in this group we have the apostle Paul saying they are pursuing. He says they are zealously seeking.

Take every worldview, take every world religion, and what they put forward for their followers is a path to be accepted by some deity, to be accepted by whatever their understanding of God is. There is some path that they can follow that will hopefully take them to a better life after death. It is just a part of world religions. Everybody has some

understanding of what they need to do in order to gain acceptance with God or with the deity or whoever they believe is a higher power. Paul acknowledges here that Israel was in that category of seekers in the sense that they wanted a right standing with God. and he says they were zealous about it. They were zealous. They were intense in this seeking after. They were not halfhearted. The problem is, as we've seen repeatedly, is they wanted this acceptance by God, and they wanted this right standing before God based not on what God had provided for them, but based on what they wanted to do for God. That was what he talked about in the 10th chapter verse 2: "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of the righteousness of God in seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."

Just think of all of the people who are caught up in a very similar mentality today. Those that were in that last category of your friends that are very zealous in their religious pursuit, very diligent to do what they think God wants them to do in order to be accepted by Him. Even as Christians, it is easy for us to jump on a performance treadmill and to think that there are things that we need to be doing constantly to be in a place of acceptance before God. It's not just those that don't know Christ that fall into this trap, but it's us as well at times. That's why Paul said what he did in verse 6: "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." We have Israel as a national entity caught up in a pursuit of God that is based on self-righteousness and it leads to failure.

The second group is the elect and in this case the word that I link with it is the word "salvation". The elect obtained it. So now I look at that and ask what is the "it" that they have obtained? The it is salvation. It is justification by faith. It's back in Paul's statement in the 8th chapter verse 29: "For those whom He foreknew (that is, He set His love upon) He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined, He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified." Being chosen leads to, results in justification. Being chosen always leads to salvation. We've said this a hundred times but we'll say it again. Election is not the same as salvation. But election always leads to salvation. There must still obviously

be belief on our part. But whom God has chosen, Romans 8:30, says in the eyes of God they've already been glorified so certain is their path.

Now notice he says the elect obtained it. You might think on the basis of that that the elect did something. It that almost reads that way. The elect obtained it. Of course, they did do something. As we just said, they believed. You have to exercise faith to step into salvation even as an elect person. There still is a point in time, a moment in which you in faith believe the gospel. Here is what Christ has done for you. The word that Paul uses here that is translated in the ESV as the elect could just as easily have been translated election. Election. That's the way, if you happen to have the King James Bible this morning, your version says the election has obtained it. This is the only time in all the New Testament that this word appears. the election has obtained it. If this is what Paul was trying to say here, to me it very specifically points to what God has done. It takes the emphasis away from the elect have obtained it, as if they had done something, and it points to what God has done. It points us to grace. It takes the eyes off of us because always, my friends, grace and election go together. Election and grace go together. That was the whole thrust of that 6th verse.

The third word is the word judgment. With the word judgment, we tie the last group and the last group is the rest. "But the rest were hardened." The rest here refers again as we said to those who were not chosen. In the context of 9,10, and 11 the chosen are Jews. They're a part of this national entity that he identified as Israel. We read that they were hardened. They were made obstinate. They were made stubborn. They were made stubborn towards the grace of God. They were made stubborn towards the idea that Christ might be the Messiah. They are made stubborn towards the very gospel of God's grace. The idea of justification by faith was one that they would not accept.

It's a different word. Back in 9:18 you have the statement there: "So then He has mercy on whomever He wills and He hardens whomever He wills." That's a different word than he uses here. It's a different word than he used in verse 21, that last verse that we've already read. That He held out His hands to a disobedient and contrary or obstinate people. It's a different word. This is a word that speaks almost of a callous. You know, guys, when you shake another guy's hand and you realize as you're shaking

that hand this is a rough hand. This is a calloused hand. I get that a lot from guys as they shake my hand, but that's the idea. No lotion ever touches these hands. It's calloused. It's hard. That's the word that he uses here. You notice that he says that they were made to be this way. That's the idea of the verb here. It's a passive verb, which means what happened to them happened from a source outside of themselves.

To jump as we will in just a moment to verses 8 through 10, but before we do that, just a quick example of this very thing. we've already seen this in the life of who? Pharaoh. God says Moses, I want you to go to Egypt and this is what's going to happen. Moses, I'm going to harden Pharaoh's heart. That was said before he ever got there, just for context. When Moses gets there and he begins to put on display the glory and the power and the majesty of God, what do we read? Pharaoh hardened his heart. Pharaoh hardened his heart. Pharaoh hardened his heart. And then all the sudden, the reader who's paying attention realizes that it doesn't say that anymore. It says God hardened Pharaoh's heart. We've already got a back story to this. That's what Paul is going to speak of in the life of these that are called the rest and experience God's judgment. So as to Israel's past, Israel's present, and Israel's future – chapters 8, 9, and 10. Israel as those whom are this national corporate entity, those who are elect, and those who are not part of the remnant, there is failure. there is salvation. there is judgment.

Now that's all in that 7th verse which is just a summary of what he's already said. But now in verses 8, 9 and 10, Paul's going to say to us now here's the support for what I just said. It's very interesting how he begins that 8th verse because he says "as it is written". As it is written. In other words, Paul is quoting Billy Graham. Remember when Billy Graham would pick up his Bible and he'd roll the cover back. He'd lean out over the pulpit and he'd put his hand out and say the Bible says. That's what Paul's doing here. Paul is saying I know I have just said some things that are hard. I know I've said some things that you want some further help on and so here is now the support that I want you to see. By the way, just so you know, this support is not coming from me. This support is coming from the Old Testament. The Bible says. It's not me saying this. It is the Old Testament Scriptures.

My first point is simply this. It's hard but it's not shocking. What do I mean? It's hard but not shocking. Obviously, it's hard what we've just seen but it's not shocking because it's already been said numerous times in Scripture. These very truths have already been revealed and what Paul does in a very intentional way, he wraps his arms around the whole of the Old Testament and he's going to take us back first of all to the law. He's going to take us to Moses's comments in Deuteronomy 29. Then he is going to go to the prophets and he's going to quote from Isaiah. And then he's going to go to David as a part of the writings. When they wanted to refer to the Old Testament Scriptures they would often refer to the law and the prophets. But sometimes when they wanted to say that this is the whole of the Old Testament, they would say the law, the prophets, and the writings. That's what he's doing here. He is bringing together all of the Scripture. Deuteronomy 29 is Moses. 1400 years before Paul gives us his epistle, Moses said this. He combines what Moses said with the statement of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 29. Then David gives to us in his psalm what is both an imprecatory psalm and a messianic psalm in that Psalm 69.

Let's start off by just noting verse 8: "As it is written," – my Bible says this, the whole of the Old Testament says – "God gave them us a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see, and ears that would not hear; down to this very day." That word stupor is a word that speaks of being unable to respond. God gave them a spirit of stupor. They were unable to respond. It is what happens when your arm or your leg falls asleep because it's not getting the proper blood circulation. Then when you realize that and you pull it off of the couch, it just doesn't want to do what it's supposed to do. It's in the state of stupor. It can't respond to what you wanted it to do. That's the word that he is speaking of here. He said they have eyes but they don't see. They have ears but they don't hear. A hard word but the truth of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Look at verses 9 and 10: "And David says (Psalm 69), 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.'" What is a table? When he says in that 9th verse – Let their table become a snare. When you think of the table, what do you think of? You think of a place of provision. You think of a place of nourishment. You think of a place of fellowship. That's what a table is. you prepare a table before me.

Psalm 23. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. It was speaking of God's provision, of God's blessing. Instead of being a place of blessing and provision, the prayer that David prays about his enemies Paul applies it here to the rest whose eyes cannot see and ears cannot hear. Instead of a blessing, there is a curse. There is retribution. Retribution is to receive what you justly deserve. Instead of grace and mercy, which we don't deserve, there's retribution, which is what all of us deserve. Bend their backs. It's a picture of bondage. It's a picture of slavery. It might very well be that Paul has in mind the weight of the law. The works that they are trying to do. All of this self-righteousness. What is self-righteousness ultimately do to us? Spiritually, it bends our back. We never know if it's enough. We're under a constant weight and burden. That's what Paul speaks of there.

Remember at the beginning, we can either read verses like this and say here they are. They're in the Bible. I don't know exactly what to do with them. I don't fully understand, but this is God's word to us. Or we can seek to find an easier solution. I don't think there is one because here's what I want you to see. This isn't just the Old Testament. The second thing you want to note is Jesus said all of this stuff too. Jesus said very similar things to this. Matthew 13 verse 10: "Then the disciples came and said to Him, 'Why do You speak to them in parables?' And He answered them, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: You will indeed hear but never understand, you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their eyes they can barely hear, and their ears they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'"

If we had time, we could just jump back into chapter 12. In Matthew chapter 12, you know what happens. There's the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. You can literally take a black marker between chapter 12 of Matthew and chapter 13 and you can just draw a line between those two chapters because chapter 13 begins Jesus's ministry of

teaching in parables. Because having ears they would not hear, having eyes they would not see even to the extent that the religious leaders said Jesus was doing these works of miracles that Isaiah had prophesied the Messiah would do, but He's doing them in the power of the devil himself. It is a word of judgment. Do you know that Isaiah 6 is the most quoted Old Testament text in the New Testament? This matter of seeing but not seeing, hearing but not hearing, having a heart that is dull that they will not understand.

So, how do we understand this? I want to just give you four things to ponder as we close. Deuteronomy 29:29 is always a good place to start. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever." There are things that God has revealed to us and there are other things that He has chosen not to reveal to us. He has kept them shrouded in mystery. I can't help but think that that's an appropriate verse for this morning.

Secondly, Paul isn't teaching that God hardened those who wanted to be saved. We've said this repeatedly as well. It's not God hardening the hearts of those innocent people who want to be saved but they realize that they've not been chosen and therefore there is no path to salvation. That's not what this is teaching. It is teaching that having heard, having understood, they choose to walk in their own self-righteousness. They turn from the gospel of grace and they embrace their own works. They're hardened because they refuse to believe. It's not unlike Romans 1 where we read "and God gave them over". And God gave them over. Those chosen are chosen by grace.

Why did God choose Abraham? Why out of all of the people in the land of Ur did God choose Abraham? There was only one reason. Grace. Why did God choose Jacob instead of Esau? He was a rascal. He was a deceiver. God chose him by grace. Why did God choose a persecutor of the church named Saul? It's called grace. Why did God choose you? Why did He choose me? It's called grace. There is no other explanation, my friend. It is the grace of God.

Here is the last thing. There is a warning here. There is surely a warning in these verses. If you don't want to hear and believe the gospel, if you don't want to hear the word and submit your heart to the word, be careful. Be careful because God may grant you that request. When the word is open before you and you read it, as hard as it might be in various places to understand and accept what it says, pray to God that you and I

always have a receptive heart, a heart that reflects the soil of our soul having been turned by the spirit and do everything within our power to resist a hard and apathetic heart. I do believe there is an application for everybody in this passage and that application is if that's the stance that you want to take in light of the truth of God's word, God forbid, but He may grant it.

What do we take away? Just three words. Humility, reverence, and gratitude. Humility, reverence, and gratitude. God resists the proud but He always gives grace to the humble. Reverence and awe before a God who is so beyond our ability to grasp and understand that all we can do is to worship. Then gratitude and thanks for His grace.

My friends, the whole world and everybody in this room falls into this category. We're in two categories this morning. We're either gospel embracers or we're gospel rejecters. You either believe that Jesus came and died on the cross for our sins and was raised again, and you put your trust in that alone to gain a right standing before God, to be acceptable to God. Or you are saying to God, I've got this. I can do it myself. Our prayer for you this morning, my prayer for you this morning is you'll be a gospel embracer. Say yes this morning to this glorious gospel.

Let's pray. Father God, we love Your word. We love the fact that You have made Yourself known to us. We love the fact that You have revealed the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and You have told us, Father, rightfully of our own condition and heart before You, that we are lost and in need of a Savior. You have told us that the only way is by grace. We're saved through faith, not of ourselves, the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast. Father God, I pray right now in these closing moments and as we finish out this morning around this expression of communion that Your Holy Spirit will open eyes to welcome this gospel and to grant eternal life in Jesus's name, amen.