

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Has God Pushed-Away His People?

By Dan Trygg

"I ask, then, has God rejected (pushed-away) His people? Absolutely not! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected (pushed-away) His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says to Elijah, as he pleads with God against Israel? ³ 'Lord, they have killed Your prophets, torn down Your altars; and I am the only one left, and they are trying to take my life!' ⁴ But what was God's reply to him? 'I have left 7,000 men 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 it is by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace. ⁷ What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened..." Romans 11:1-7

Paul had clearly established that not everyone physically descended from Israel continued in the faith of Abraham. The reason for this was not because of something defective with God's Word. Rather, **it was caused by the stubborn-resistance of those who heard the message, but did not give heed to the Good News** that was preached to them. This was a reality that was played out over and over throughout history, and was happening again in the first century. **Many, even most, of the Jews of that day had heard of, and rejected, the righteousness of God offered as a gift to be received by faith.** They had chosen to continue in the religious practices they were accustomed to.

This brought up another question. Did God reject His people? Had God changed His plan, or His covenant with Israel? Had He given up on the Jews? **Had He diverted His focus, and pushed Israel away? Paul's answer is quite firm: Absolutely not!** May it never be! **Paul himself was a case in point. He was an Israelite, and God had saved him.** Furthermore, the entire beginning of the Christian movement started in Palestine with believing Jews.

Paul again restates his point: **God did not push-away His people whom He foreknew. There are two very important concepts in this statement.**

First, is the idea of "rejection". The word meant literally, "forcefully-push-away, thrust-off-from-oneself, repel, drive-away-from-oneself, repudiate, refuse". As we saw in the final verse of chapter ten, **God was the ultimate example of longsuffering:** "All day long I have stretched out My hands to a stubbornly-resistant and argumentative people." This God, who so patiently extended His grace to Israel "all day long" is not now forcefully rejecting them.

The other important word in this phrase is "foreknew". What does this word mean? **Literally, it means to "know ahead-of-time, know already".** Some would give it a very specialized meaning, claiming that it means to "effectively-know; to select or choose in advance". To me, this seems to be an unjustified stretch beyond the normal use of the word, and certainly is not required here. *How do I know?* Because Paul gives us an example to help us understand. He refers to an event recorded in 1 Kings 19:9-18. Elijah the prophet had fled from a threat from evil queen, Jezebel. He made his way to Mount Sinai, and hid in a cave. God visited him there, and asked Him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Twice, Elijah says, "I have been very zealous for Yahweh, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life" (vss. 10,14). [In Romans 11, Paul refers to this as Elijah interceding *against* Israel, because they had become idolatrous and hostile to the truth.] Elijah presented himself as the final holdout, the last faithful one, the last one left. But what was the divine revelation made back to him? "I have left to Myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal". Notice that the translation I just rendered here does not say "*kept* for Myself". That is NOT what the Greek word is. That is an unjustified interpolation of meaning that the original does not necessarily carry. The phrase is simply, "I left to Myself". It says nothing about what kind of involvement God had in their life to cause this, ...or not cause this. All it says is that He "left" seven thousand "who did not bow the knee to Baal". Furthermore, 1 Kings 19:18 says that God "*will* leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees who have not bowed the knees to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him." Somehow God's activity *will help them to maintain the faithfulness they have already shown*, in the face of pressure and opposition. (This sounds similar to the discussion we had in Romans 9:15, "I *will* have mercy on the one who *has* My mercy, and I *will* have compassion on the one who *has* My compassion." Is God saying that He will strengthen their resolve to be faithful to Yahweh, ...a resolve they have *already* demonstrated?) **What is the foreknowledge in this passage?** God *knew* about the seven thousand *before* it came up in conversation with Elijah. Does it say that God *caused* them to not bow the knee to Baal? No. **In the context of Romans 11, what Paul is saying is that God knows ahead of time those who have not, or will not, reject the message of the gospel, ...and He will not drive-them-away or forcefully-push-them-away from Him.**

“Therefore, *in the same way* also in the present time a remnant according to gracious choice has come to be.” Paul uses the illustration about the remnant that was “left” in the time of Elijah to help us understand the current situation with the remnant of Jews who had believed in Christ in the first century. He uses a “therefore” to indicate a logical connection. The next phrase, “in the same way”, implies that what was happening with the remnant of believing Jews in Paul’s day was very similar to what had transpired some nine centuries earlier. **In both cases, a remnant was “left” or “remained” according to a choice of grace on God’s part.** Just as God kept working with a lineage of the Jews to bring the Messiah into the world, **even now, God is not done with the Jews. In His grace, He has kept the nation from total collapse and destruction. *The focus of this entire discussion is NOT about individual salvation; it is about God graciously purposing to keep alive a remnant of people from Israel. In the midst of centuries of apostasy and stubborn-resistance, God continued to be the gracious, covenant-keeping God.***

“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Rom. 11:6). This statement revisits Paul’s earlier argument. The majority of Jews were seeking to establish their own righteousness by keeping works of the Law. **Those of the remnant were ones who submitted to the grace of God. They accepted God’s provision in Christ for them, choosing to believe in His offer of salvation *based upon what He did for them*, not based upon their performance.** These two approaches to acceptance with God are incompatible. In Romans 4:4,5, Paul had written, “...to the one who works, pay is not considered as a gift, but as what is due”, a *debt* or *obligation*. “...but to the one who *does not work*, but *trusts* Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is *counted* (or credited) *as* righteousness.” The first scenario is righteousness *by works*, the second one is righteousness *by grace*.

“What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it...” (Rom. 11:7). Israel did not obtain the salvation they were looking for, because they were trying to obtain it by works. **Israel’s approach was doomed to failure, because none of us could ever be “good enough” to be acceptable to God, in our own merit.** Israel did not obtain salvation, because they were unwilling to submit to the righteousness that comes from God as a gift, and were seeking to establish their own righteousness based upon their good behavior. As James, the brother of Jesus, had written, “...whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). **“...those who were chosen...”** In the Greek, this literally is “the chosen” or “the elect”. The word is singular, not plural. It refers to the entire group, not individuals. It is also a *noun*, not a *verbal clause*. They are simply called “the elect” (which can also mean “select, choice”, as in the desirable-ones), NOT “those who were chosen”. **The elect obtained salvation, because they accepted the righteousness of God offered to them *as a gift*, ...receiving this offer by faith or trust. They trusted in what God has done, *not their own abilities*.**

“...and the rest *were hardened*, 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’” (11:8,9). Just like the offshoots of the family tree in the past had diverged from the Messianic lineage, and wandered off into confusion and destruction, in a similar way **the unbelieving Jews of Paul’s day had also rejected truth, and made choices that resulted in spiritual darkness and blindness.** This notion of spiritual darkness following a rejection of truth is a theme repeated from chapter 1, where God gave people over to the futility of their minds for suppressing the truth they were aware of. In the same way, in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12, those who do not love and acknowledge the truth will be deceived, and a “spirit of deception” will even come upon them as a result of their disdain for the truth. Here in Romans 11, **the word for “harden” is a word meaning to “petrify, ossify”, or to become *calloused* and *insensitive*.** Then, the word for “stupor” refers to **an inability to think**, such as we can experience sometimes when we are tired, or abruptly awakened from a sound sleep. **It is important to understand this principle. There are *consequences* for disregarding truth.** When we do so, we begin to thicken a callous toward truth, and spiritual darkness begins to influence us more. This is a dangerous game to play. If we do not respond to the light and understanding that God will grant us, we can easily drift back into darkness and unperceptiveness, and barely even notice.

“And David says, ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. ¹⁰ Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever’” (11:9,10). Paul ends this section with a couple of verses from Psalm 69:22:23. **The point of the first part is that their “dining table” will be an *unrecognized danger* that will *catch them* and *keep them stuck*, and, at the same time, it will be a *stumbling block* and a *retribution*, or “payment-in-kind” for their behavior.** The net affect will be to cause their spiritual discernment to be darkened, and to weigh them down so that **they will be in a state of bondage, depression and oppression.**

The way this has worked out in history is that the Jews have seemingly prospered wherever they have gone. **This prosperity, the “blessing of their table”, has been interpreted by them as God’s affirmation of them,** when it is in reality part of this curse or judgment which has followed them. **Their pride and prosperity have actually *fed* their self-deception, and kept them blind and stuck.** It also has been the basis of much prejudice and persecution against them. The very thing they have taken pride in has been the source of sorrow and oppression, and has kept them stuck.