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A Remnant Chosen by Grace Romans 11:1-6

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Elijah was *the* great prophet of the Old Testament. We meet him in 1 Kings 17. He steps onto the scene just after we've been told about King Ahab of Israel. Israel's kings were all bad, but the writer of Kings has this to say about Ahab: "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:34). Both his name and the name of his pagan queen, Jezebel, have become synonymous with evil. Ahab, we're told, worshipped the Canaanite god, Baal, and built an altar and a temple for him in Samaria, Israel's capital. Ahab led his people into apostasy. And Elijah had the unenviable task of confronting him. Twice, the Lord sent Elijah to Ahab. The first time it was to announce that the Lord was sending judgement on Israel in the form of a drought. Elijah ran and hid from the king for three years as a terrible famine brought Israel to her knees. For three years, the king and the people prayed to Baal for rain, but none came. Then the Lord sent Elijah back to Ahab. The Lord would send rain despite Israel's unfaithfulness, but it wasn't just going to rain. All of Israel was to assemble at Mt. Carmel so that they could see who the real god was, so that they could see for themselves that it was the Lord, not Baal, who was worthy of their worship..

On the mountain top, Elijah had his famous showdown with the prophets of Baal. He challenged the prophets of Baal to build an altar, to sacrifice a bull, and to call down fire from heaven. All day they sang and prayed and wailed. They cut themselves and danced around their altar, but Baal

never answered. Elijah then rebuilt the altar of the Lord that had been allowed to fall to pieces. He placed his bull on the altar with wood for the fire. And then he did the unexpected, having the people douse it with water three times, until the wood was soaked and the water filled a trench around the altar. Elijah then prayed a simple prayer. He prayed that the God of Israel would send down fire so that the people of Israel would turn back to him. In response to his simple prayer the Lord acted. Fire fell from heaven. It not only consumed the sacrifice, but it consumed the stones of the altar itself and the water around it. The people were amazed and as the rain fell and the drought broke, they took hold of the prophets of Baal and killed them.

You might think that after such a great victory over the false god, Baal, and with the people of Israel turning back to the Lord, that Elijah would be ready to lead a victory march on Ahab and Jezebel's palace. But that's just the opposite of what happened. Elijah ran into the wilderness to hide from the angry king. Lonely, exhausted, and hungry, Elijah sulked. But the Lord came to him and asked, "What are you doing here?" In response, Elijah sulked some more: "I have been zealous for the Lord, but the Israelites have forsaken you and killed your prophets and now I'm left all alone...oh...and they want to kill me" (1 Kings 19:10).

This is the story that Paul draws on in the first part of Romans 11. It would be easy to picture Paul, sulking like Elijah. He has preached his heart out. He has shed tears. He has prayed. He's sacrificed and put his own life at risk over and over. He's done it all to proclaim to the Gentiles that Jesus is the Messiah that Israel had hoped for. Paul has invested his life in God's promise to Abraham—the promise to Israel that he would be their God and they would be his people and that this promise would one day extend to the Gentiles, to the nations, to the whole world. And Paul's preaching has

borne great fruit amongst the Gentiles. Like Elijah, he's won an amazing victory over the pagans. And yet he sees his own people, his fellow Jews, in full rebellion against Jesus, the Messiah in whom their law and their prophets—their whole faith—finds its fulfilment. Although Paul saw his mission as one to the Gentiles, it's likely that he first went to the synagogue in each place he visited. Preaching there, first, the good news about Jesus, before going to the Gentiles. If he was lucky they simply told him to leave. More than once he was beaten or stoned—even left for dead. Over the course of Chapters 9 and 10, Paul has revisited the story of Israel and her God through the lens of Jesus the Messiah. If it wasn't clear before, it should be abundantly clear that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises to his people, but Israel still stands in open rebellion against him. Paul could very easily sulk like Elijah: "I am zealous for the Lord, but the Israelites have forsaken you. I am all alone and they want me dead."

But Paul understood that God is righteous—that he keeps his covenant promises. That didn't put an end to his concern. The continuing rejection of Jesus by his people was a serious problem for Paul. He started this section, back in Chapter 9, writing about the sorrow and grief it caused him when he saw his fellow Jews happily marching down the path to judgement. Like Moses, he was willing to be cut off himself if it would mean bringing his people into the true, the new Israel. But, again, Paul has hope because he has faith in the God who has proved his faithfulness in Jesus. The hard part happened when God gave his own Son as a sacrifice for the sins of his people. And if God has accomplished the hard part, we can be sure he won't let it go to waste. Converting stubborn hearts and minds—that's the easy part. And Paul knew that God's word does not return void and he knew that God's Spirit is powerful and irresistible. That gospel hope shapes everything Paul is about to say.

Look now at Romans 11. Here's what Paul writes in verse 1:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people?

Paul might have been tempted to think that. We might be tempted to think that ad we wouldn't be the first. Many Christians over the last two thousand years have concluded that God has rejected his people, ethnic Israel—and this sort of thinking has been used to justify all sorts of evil against Jews. For many people in church history this has been a mostly academic question, but it certainly wasn't for Paul. And living in a time in which the Holocaust still casts its shadow, in which some of its survivors still live, it's not an academic question for us either. Paul's answer to the question is:

By no means!

But how does he get to that conclusion? Most people today would say the same thing. The problem is that most people today don't seem to get to that answer the same way that Paul did. Romans 11 has been a very controversial passage and that's mostly because we know we can't approach this in a detached or academic way.

There are two ways that most modern people have addressed Paul's question. The first way—which has dominated the more liberal side of the Church—has been to simply give up Paul's concern for Israel. Anything goes. There are many paths to God. No one really needs to worry about the judgement that Paul was so concerned about. Jews can follow their path to God and we'll follow ours and we'll all happily meet up someday. This obviously doesn't work if we're going to take Paul seriously. It may assuage our consciences for the guilt of past sins against Jews and it relieves us of the responsibility of preaching repentance to people who—we might

think—have been through enough already. But it fails to take seriously Paul's own grief and sorrow over his people's rejection of the Messiah.

The other answer that we usually hear from the Evangelical side—at least in North America and for the last century or so—is informed by the theological system called “Dispensationalism” and is centred on the idea that in the lead-up to the “millennium”, ethnic Israel will return to the Holy Land in fulfilment of prophecies—re-establishing the law and rebuilding the temple. The creation of the modern state of Israel is seen as a prophetic fulfilment and as a foreshadowing of what Paul says here in Romans 11, despite more than a generation having now passed and despite ethnic Israel's continuing rejection of Jesus and—for many—even the rejection of the law and of God himself. Groups like the so-called International Christian Embassy in Israel are well-meaning, but their answer to Paul's question, “Is God finished with Israel?”, ignores everything else Paul has to say here and bypasses the way Paul stresses *all* are to come to Christian faith. The Dispensationalists also do Israel no favours in that most of them encourage Israel to pursue or fixate on the very “works of the law” that Paul tells us were Israel's downfall.

No, Paul has another answer and we see it in the second half of verse 1. God is not done with his people and here's why:

For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

Paul answers the question by starting with himself. If God were categorically finished with ethnic Jews, how do you explain Paul? He was an ardent *opponent* of Jesus and the Church. He was the great exemplar of unbelieving Israel—the very people we might be inclined to think God has cast aside for their

perpetual unfaithfulness. And yet Paul is here. And not by accident. Paul is here because Jesus himself sought him out. Paul is a Christian *and* he's a Jew—and not just any Jew, but a member of the tribe of Benjamin. This is something like Paul's statement in Philippians that he's a “Hebrew of Hebrews”. And the fact that he is both a Jew and a Christian prompts him to quote 1 Samuel 12:22 with confidence:

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

The quote from Samuel highlights how Paul saw his own role in bringing Israel to faith. Samuel said this as part of his promise that he would never stop praying for Israel. No matter how sinful and stupid she was, he would pray for her. And that's how Paul saw himself—praying for his people, like Moses and like Samuel. No matter how hopeless it seemed he had a gospel-centred hope. But, also, the passage Paul quotes from in Samuel is about God's provision for Israel in the giving of her first king, Saul—who also happened to be from the tribe of Benjamin. Do you remember what Paul's Hebrew name was? It was “Saul”. Paul saw in himself, God's provision for his people—which is interesting, because Paul saw his mission as being to the Gentiles. Peter, James, John and the others could preach to the Jews, but Paul's calling was to the Gentiles. And yet he saw in his own calling and ministry hope for Israel. This will be important as he explains his reasoning later in the chapter.

So Paul sees in himself part of the answer. But how does that work? This is where the story of Elijah helps. Look at verses 2-4:

Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone

am left, and they seek my life.” But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

In his despair, Elijah stopped thinking about anything other than himself. He thought the end of the world had come, but if we were to go back to 1 Kings, one of the things we’d see inserted into the middle of the story of Elijah and Ahab is the note that while all of this was going on, the priest, Obadiah, had hidden a hundred faithful priests away from the wicked king. God is faithful to his promises even if we can’t see what he’s doing ourselves. And Paul learned a lesson from that story. God has kept a remnant and through them his promises will live on.

This idea of a remnant goes back to Elijah, but it came to full fruit in Isaiah’s prophecies. God’s judgement was coming. Disaster would overwhelm Israel—just as Moses had said it would—but Isaiah wrote that a “holy seed” would survive. The tree would be cut down, but the stump would remain and out of the stump new shoots would grow. Paul will draw on this imagery later in the chapter. Isaiah had declared, “A remnant shall return” (9:20-23)—a passage Paul has already quoted. The Exile might have seemed like the end of Israel, the people gone forever, but a few would return and from that little group a new—or, better, a *renewed*—people would grow.

Paul now takes this idea from the Old Testament and from Israel’s history and sees in it an explanation for what was happening in his day. Look at verses 5 and 6:

So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What happened at the Exile, with most of Israel lost forever, but a few returning and forming the basis for a renewed people is happening again. Israel’s response to Jesus was a make or break moment. That day when the nation cried out, “Crucify him!” was decisive. Israel rejected the Messiah and her God who had sent him. Just as Israel in Elijah’s day had been impressed at the mighty things she saw God do, but then turned back to Baal, so Israel had done in response to Jesus. The nation was finished. Judgement was soon to come. But there was hope for a few. Paul, himself from one of the two remnant tribes, is a sign that God has not abandoned his people.

Finally, Paul stresses the nature of this remnant—and this is where the liberal idea that the Jews will be okay because all paths lead to God and the Dispensationalist idea of a revival of ethnic Israel identified by “works of the law” both depart dramatically from Paul’s vision of the remnant—Paul stresses that this is not a remnant made up of ethnic Jews who finally succeeded in obeying the *torah* and who established a status of covenant membership based on their biological descent from Abraham and maintaining the distinctive outward markers of circumcision, diet, and Sabbath—as if there was some group that found Israel’s privileges could, after all and somehow, be counted as gain instead of loss. (Contrary to silly old Paul!) No, that was the path that brought God’s judgement down on Israel. To the contrary, this remnant is chosen by *grace*, which rules out entirely the idea of works and national or ethnic privilege. Their identity is not found in circumcision, diet, or Sabbath—not in works of the law—but in the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the shoot who has sprouted from the stump that remains. This is the way to life, this is the way of the new covenant family, this is the way of the kingdom and the age to come, this is the way to redemption and

renewal—a gracious calling to faith in Jesus the Messiah—and it is the *only* way.

In verse 32, Paul writes that, “God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” His point is that Abraham’s biological children have no privilege in God’s economy of grace—and that that’s a good thing—because it is the very thing that has brought God’s promises to Abraham to fulfilment in Jesus and the redemption of the nations. But if God’s salvation is by grace, that gives Paul all the more reason to hope. What happened in Elijah’s day with the salvation of a remnant can happen again. Paul has hope. His own heart was hard, but God’s grace was able to reach him and God’s grace can and will certainly reach more, to draw them into the new covenant family.

Paul is just beginning his line of thought here, but this is as far as we have time to go today. But what can we take away so far by way of application? First, as I read this part of Romans, what strikes me over and over is the need for sound doctrine that takes seriously what Paul actually wrote here. Specifically, a need for sound doctrine that is *rooted in this story or this narrative of Israel and Israel’s God*. And that’s important, because our doctrine is what gives shape to what we do as Christians and how we engage in missions and interfaith dialogue. I don’t think we’re much in danger of falling into the “liberal” all-paths-lead-to-God way of thinking that simply allows us to ignore the need to proclaim the good news about Jesus to everyone, including Jews. But we are in danger of being swept up in well-meaning, but misguided efforts to evangelise Jews that are driven by bad Bible interpretation and bad theology from the Evangelical side. (This goes, by the way, for an awful lot of what the Church does, not just how we evangelise Jews!) The Dispensational approach to things has many well-

meaning Christians reaching out to Jews and to Israel in ways that, while they usually do proclaim the good news, frequently undermine that news by encouraging the very works of the law, finding of security in the exclusive ethnic markers of the law, and fixation on the land that caused Israel to reject Jesus as Messiah in the first place. Brothers and Sisters, the Church's mission can't be based on good sentiments alone. It must be rooted in sound biblical interpretation and theology. It has to be theology that gets the big story right. I think it also goes without saying that our mission can never be based on sensationalist flights of "Bible prophecy" fancy, but sadly, that's what a lot of North American Christians have done.

Second, and on a more positive note, Paul's argument here should prompt us to reflect on the way we respond to the problems we face in our own lives and in our church. Personally, I find that I'm more and more inclined to be overwhelmed by what seems to be the futility of proclaiming the good news about Jesus to a world that seems utterly deaf to it. Paul could have easily despaired for his people, but as much as their condemnation for their unfaithfulness brought him sorrow and grief, he lived with a gospel hope. If the grace of God could reach him, it could reach other Jews too. And, Brothers and Sisters, if the grace of God could reach you—and I think particular of those of you who did not grow up in Christians homes—we can go out into the world with Paul's gospel hope, knowing that God's word does not return void and that there is a remnant of men and women who will be reach by God's grace. Just as Jesus promised, we may be rejected and even persecuted for his sake—Paul knew this first hand and better than anyone—but he also knew that the good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness of God. He knew his place in the story. And because of that he went out with confidence—not

with confidence in himself, but with confidence in the faithfulness and goodness of God.

Let us pray: Almighty God, when we are faced with the intractable rebelliousness and sinfulness of the world and are tempted to lose hope and sulk like Elijah, remind us again of our weakness. Remind us again that the Gospel does not depend on our strength, but on your faithfulness and your grace. And, in that, give us confidence to live and to preach your good news in faith-filled hope. Through Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.