

GOD'S MISSION THROUGH HIS REMNANT

Romans 11:1-36

Key verse 11:4

"And what was God's answer to him? 'I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the [knee](#) to Baal.'"

In the previous chapter, we studied that God's message to a lost [world](#) is, "Jesus is Christ the Lord." John 14:6 says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Acts 16:31 says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved--you and your household." Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." But it is a shock that most people reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ because they love the darkness rather than the light of the Gospel. Therefore, we must always be prepared in our hearts to proclaim why Jesus is Christ the Lord. 1 Peter 3:15a says, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." In today's passage, Paul teaches us that God fulfills his world salvation work in his sovereign power and wisdom, and both through his chosen people and through the Gentiles, especially through his remnant of New Testament time. Most of all we learn in this passage that God has a great hope in his people Israel, to be fully restored and used in his glorious world salvation work.

I. God's remnant in Israel (1-10)

First, the remnant of God chosen by grace (1-6). 10:21 closed on a dismal note. It says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." It is easy to infer that God has abandoned his people Israel in fulfilling world salvation work, even though he loves them dearly, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). But Paul says, "By no means!" Look at verse 1. "I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham..." Paul himself was a blasphemer and a persecutor of the church of God. But God forgave his sins unconditionally and made him his chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel (Ac 9:15). To Paul, God's choosing is totally undeserved grace based on God's sovereign will. Paul believed that this grace still applies to his people, and that God would heal his people's unbelief and continue to use them as a priestly nation as God had done for him.

When we trace the history of Israel in retrospect, we learn that God began his world salvation work with one person Abraham and kept on carrying out his work, coworking together with his people, even though his people had been disobedient, rebellious and obstinate. It is because God's history is rooted in the sovereignty of electing grace. Paul knew that his people did not acknowledge God's grace of election. So Paul exclaims to his people, in verse 2a, "God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew." To Paul, our God is the sovereign God and the God of providence and promise; our God does not break his promise to Abraham and his servants. Likewise, God does not cancel his electing grace for his people. He never gives up on his people in spite of their

shortcomings. But God's work and history is somewhat different from worldly history. So Paul takes Elijah for an example to explain the faithfulness of God in his sovereign choice. In the time of Elijah the prophet, God's chosen people became Baal worshipers. The immediate cause was Queen Jezebel who supported the priests of Baal. The root cause was their love of the world. For Baal was a god of agriculture, so people believed that they would prosper if they believed in Baal. Baal worship inundated the land. And the worldly consensus was antagonistic toward the people of God. Elijah was a man of God's spirit. He challenged the Baal priests to prove whose God was the living God. The Baal priests lost the contest when, in answer to Elijah's prayer, the burning fire fell, consuming the sacrifice on the altar. Then Elijah the prophet, in an attempt to exterminate Baal worshipers in the land, destroyed 400 Baal priests in the Kishon Valley all at once. After that he was exhausted, and was afraid of the powerful woman, Jezebel. In his desperation, he appealed to God: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me" (1 Ki 19:10). It meant, "Your work has almost perished and I am going to perish."

What was God's answer to him? Look at verse 4b. "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." In verse 4, "for myself," means for my own purposes, my own glory, my own very good reasons, and my own ultimate triumph. Elijah became speechless when he heard that there were 7,000 remnants of God because he thought there was none except he himself. The remnants of God are not conspicuous. But from God's point of view they are always an absolute majority, not a minority. Look at verse 5. "So too, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace." Zechariah's family was a remnant family. There was a remnant of God, Matthew Rich, a missionary to Manchuria. He dedicated himself to the proclamation of the Gospel message for 25 years. No one accepted the Gospel. One day, one young Chinese man said, "I have decided to believe in Jesus." But he disappeared after getting a pocket watch from the missionary. Was his ministry a failure? No! In the world salvation work of God he was used in a most lonely place as a small lamp of God. In the sight of God, he was truly a one-star spiritual general who overcame the hardest discouragement and doubt of Satan. So many first-generation American missionaries to Korea suffered and died to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. Many of them could not do anything until almost all Koreans finished looking at them to satisfy their curiosity. To Koreans, Americans' blue eyes looked like those of mountain goats. Many first-generation American missionaries suffered like lions and tigers in a cage of a zoo.

Elijah accused his people of backsliding from God and of killing God's servants. Elijah, though he was a most powerful man of God's Spirit, together with John the Baptist, felt lonely and fearful. Of course we understand Elijah very well. Nevertheless, God's church was never larger, nor more widespread than it is today. And God's triumphs will continue until the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus seems to be a losing business and stagnant compared with the worldly businesses, it is not so. If the world is compared to the 400 Baal priests the work of God is compared to the 7,000 remnants of God. The successes and triumphs of the gospel have been grander and mightier than all other businesses of the world.

In verses 5 and 6, the word "grace" occurs 4 times. We can be remnants of God only by God's grace. Who are remnants? Remnants of God are those whom God preserved by his secret providence. Calvin said, "God has his people everywhere, even though we cannot detect them." They are those who made personal decisions to live for the glory of God. They are those who are ready to obey him. The remnant is the body of consecrated and dedicated men and women in the work and history of God, especially in God's world salvation work. Paul's point is clear. He exclaims many times that God has not repudiated his people Israel. So Paul cries out that his people must come back to God, who is waiting for them with open arms, and accept God's world salvation purpose, and restore their position as a priestly nation.

Second, the hardened hearts of unbelieving Jews (7-10). Look at Verse 7. "What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened." In this verse, the word "hardened" has the same meaning as a "callus." Just as a callus can grow on the hand, a callus can grow on the heart. If one goes on sinning, he will, in the end, become insensitive to the life of sin which brings him to death. There was a young man who accepted Jesus through Bible study. He was very popular among his fellow Christians. He looked good outwardly. But he was a slave of lustful desires. Despite his pastor's persistent admonishment, he never repented his sin before God. When he kept on sinning in his heart, soon he became insensitive to the horror of sin. The tragedy is this: When he insisted on having his heart hardened, Satan immediately snatched him away to use as one of his slaves.

His people Israel had been waiting for the coming of the Messiah as God had promised long ago. As he had promised and prophesied long ago, God sent his one and only Son as the promised Messiah. But his people ignored him as if he were no more than a carpenter of Nazareth. Finally they crucified the promised Messiah on the cross. This happened when the Jews were self-righteous and overly confident about being a chosen people. The very idea of being a chosen people had become the thing that blinded them so they could not see that the day had come--even though they groped with bent backs like men stumbling blindly in the dark. In order to expose their sin of a proud mind, Paul quotes Psalm 69:22. It says, "May the table set before them become a snare; may it become a retribution and a trap." The Jews were feasting at a rich table with arrogant minds. Then they were trapped by Satan, who channeled through their sin of self-righteousness (9). They were blind men spiritually. So they could not see what they had really wanted to see. Look at verse 10. "May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever." They thought that they were beautiful servants of God. But when they remained in their self-righteousness they could not serve God's purpose for them: They became the objects of God's wrath. When they remained in their self-righteousness they lost God's blessing for them and turned out to be enemies of God instead of being his servants.

II. God's hope for Israel (11-36)

First, Paul's view of God's history (11,12). In this part, Paul talks about the hope of God for Israel. Look at verse 11. "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious." When his chosen people became insensitive with

a callus on their hearts, God did not despair. God put his hope in his people who were in the tragic situation. To Paul, God's blessing for his people is like mighty water held behind a reservoir dam. It is always high against the bank. But his people rejected his blessing blindly.

What did God do with the blessing? He opened the dam and irrigated his blessing to the Gentiles. Many Gentiles came to Jesus by faith and trusted in the love of God. When the Gentiles accepted the Gospel of Jesus they were richly blessed. The gospel of Jesus Christ was what the Gentiles were really seeking, even though they did not seem at all likely. In this way, God's world salvation work was marching on quietly and steadily, and his blessing to the Gentiles has produced a great harvest of souls among the nations. In effect, Israel's rejection of Jesus has done the whole world a service. What was the response of the Jews to the evangelization of the Gentiles? This has moved the Jews to jealousy. There was a young man who said to his wife on the first day of their honeymoon, "I guess you are the last person I wanted to marry. You look ugly." Soon he divorced her. Then she married another person. Suddenly he came to his pastor and said, "Now I realize that my ex-wife was the most beautiful woman in the world. She had never complained to me even though I had offended her so much." The Jews were just like that stupid man. They rejected Jesus adamantly. But when they saw the Gentiles living with God's abundant blessing, they began to envy them.

Second, the Gentiles were also part of God's salvation work (13-16). Now, Paul turns to the Gentiles to explain the way of God's history. Look at verses 13 and 14. "I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them." Wesley of England was severely persecuted by the leaders of the national church, who thought that he should have no place to evangelize in England. They asked, "Where is your parish?" "The whole world is my parish," answered Wesley. Likewise, we learn that Paul's parish was the whole world. He was the apostle to the Gentiles, but he could never forget his own people.

Paul wanted his Gentile converts to know through whom their faith was channeled. Look at verse 16. "If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches." This verse is a quotation from Numbers 15:18-20. When the Jews prepared dough they offered the first part of it to God. When they did so, the whole lump of dough became holy. It was not necessary, as it were, to offer every separate mouthful of dough to God. The gist of Paul's logic is that the Gentiles are part of the holy dough offered to God because God's chosen people had offered the first part of the dough to God. Great is Paul's deep understanding of God's work and history of world salvation! Paul is no longer a bigoted Jew who thought that Jews are Jews and Gentiles are Gentiles through and through. Paul is now by God's grace a servant of God for the whole world. At that time, "Gentile" meant the whole world except the Jews. Paul accepted God's calling to the whole world as the most glorious task, a task which death could not overcome. Romans 15:16,17 says, "To be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God." When he said this, Paul's soul was overwhelmed by the grace of God--that God called him,

a wretched sinner, to be an apostle for the whole world. Of course, he was blindly misunderstood and mistreated by his fellow Jews, who were exclusive and prejudiced toward the Gentiles.

Third, the Gentiles are the branches (17-24). Look at verse 17. "If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root..." The olive and the vine are two common crops in Palestine. The wild olive is small and worthless unless its shoot is grafted into a good olive tree. Paul saw that the Gentiles were greatly indebted to the Jews, good olive trees, because the Gentiles--once worthless wild olive shoots--had become God's children, channeled through the Jews.

At the end of verse 17, "the olive root" refers to the root of Jesse (Isa 11:10), and to the root of David (Rev 5: 5; 22:16). The root of David is the Son of Man, Jesus. In relation to this root, the patriarchs, (the fathers of faith), are obviously branches. To Paul, the Gentiles are all branches of this root. So they have nothing to boast about themselves. If the Gentiles thought that the Jews were only broken-off olive branches, worthless to God, and that now God was going to use them, the Gentiles, and not the Jews, they were not spiritual at all, and their thought world was not controlled by the Holy Spirit. In a matter of time, they would be spiritually arrogant. So Paul warned them, saying, "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either" (20-24).

Fourth, the hope of God for his people (25-32). Look at verse 25a. "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited..." In this verse the word "mystery" corresponds to the world salvation plan of God. In his world salvation plan, God had never excluded his chosen people. Even though his people had failed down through the ages, God will surely bring them back. Look at verse 26b, "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob." Here the name of Jacob has a deep historical meaning. Jacob represents, in character, the people of Israel. At the present, his people rejected the Gospel, while the Gentiles received it. So they appear to be the enemies of God. But God does not think so. God thinks of them as a chosen people. God had never failed to remember the patriarchs, whom he chose to be his servants in the work of salvation. The patriarchs had faith in God's sovereignty and dedicated their lives to God. Thus they became a blessing to their people with their influence of faith. God never changes his promises, for they are based on his sovereign will. Look at verse 29. "For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." Moreover, our God is the God of mercy. God, in his great mercy, made a plan of salvation for the whole world. God, out of his mercy, chose his people Israel to be a priestly nation to save the whole world. He will not abandon his people. (30) Look at verse 32. "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."

Chapter 11:33-36 is a doxology. In his doxology, Paul praises God for the power and wisdom with which he carries out world salvation work.

In this passage we learn that God is fulfilling his world salvation work through his remnant. Although his people rejected him, God wants to see his people come back to him and assume their calling. God's hope

for Israel is indeed the hope of God which cannot be found anywhere else except in God. God wants to see that the Jews and the Gentiles all come to him and receive the world mission vision and the missionary calling. God wants us to see the fulfillment of his world salvation work.