

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.² God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: ³“Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? ⁴And what was God's answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. ⁷What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, ⁸as it is written: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day.” ⁹And David says: “May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. ¹⁰May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

You've perhaps heard stories of people who come to the United States from some other countries and how they don't even know how to process the choices available at a typical grocery store here. The choices of every kind of food are seemingly endless. You can perhaps appreciate that as you go down the cereal aisle—so many brands and choices within each brand! The bread aisle is the same, really—white, whole wheat, bread with seeds on the top, sourdoughs, low-carb, gluten-free, sprouted grain...different shapes and sizes...sliced or slice your own. How do you choose?! Well, we choose what we like, what we want to try, what we think is good for the kids, what our wife tells us to buy. There are all sorts of reasons we might make a choice.

Our lesson this morning from Romans 11 speaks of God's choice when it comes to people. The Apostle Paul wrote these words of God not to tell us *how* God made his choices, but to tell us that he did—and that he did it because of his grace.

The Choice of God

1. Take Comfort in God's Grace

2. Take Warning from Israel's History

Paul is writing to Christians living in Rome—a congregation Paul had not started nor visited. No apostle of Jesus was known to have worked in the Gentile mission field of Rome, so we don't really know how it began—but there were Christians there. Paul may very well have been writing to them to give them the benefit of some theological instruction that they otherwise did not have. And if you've read through Romans, you know that it is full of Christian doctrine!

In this part of his letter, he is following up on things he had written about the Jewish people's overall rejection of Jesus. So many were rejecting God's salvation through faith in Jesus. Had God turned his back all of them? Absolutely not! Or as he wrote, **By no means!** Paul points out that he himself was a Jewish Christian (as were Peter and other apostles), so no, the Jewish people were not abandoned by God. Paul pointed those who might be tempted to think that to the Scriptural account of the prophet Elijah, who at one time, thought he was the only one in the nation of Israel left who loved the Lord. God's answer was that it was bad—many of the nation of Israel had rejected him—but there was a remnant, a remaining group of believers, totaling 7,000. Things were not as they appeared; God knew his people and there always was this remnant called by the grace of God.

Paul assured the Roman Christians that there still was group of people out there who were called to faith by God's grace—just as it always has been. Jewish Christians were part of that body of believers along with many who were not from the nation of Israel—like many of those in Rome.

The problem with many of the Jewish people was that they were bound and determined to earn the favor of God and their place in heaven by living righteous lives. Their everyday works of faith, they felt, earned them those things. But it had never worked that way! Even though the 10 Commandments and other laws were given to them by God and they had instructions from him about regular sacrifices and all of that, those things never earned them forgiveness and heaven! The very fact that they had to keep doing them revealed that a person could never do enough to satisfy the perfect demands of a perfect God. They too were *always* saved by God's grace, his undeserved love. They were always saved by trusting God's promise of forgiveness through a Savior he would send, not by their works.

Paul explains how the grace of God works and I, personally, find this to be one of the most helpful passages and one of the most necessary concepts to file away in your brain on the subject of grace: As he speaks of the remnant, the group of people at any given time who have saving faith in God, he says that they exist because of grace...

And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Grace is the “anti-works!” The very definition of grace that we use says this—*undeserved* love. Undeserved, unmerited, unearned, not by works! If you add anything that a person does, then it ceases to be grace. This is truly good news for us; this gives us great comfort! Because if you are like me, you are very aware of your imperfection, your sin, the things that God finds appalling in your life. But God's choosing you and me to be his people has nothing to do with our behavior, our thoughts, our words. God chose us because he wanted to choose us. In this lesson he uses the words “foreknew” and “elect.” Elsewhere in the Bible it says God made us his choice before the creation of the world. If his choice goes back that far, it really is something he decided to do—and very far removed from us being born into this world or doing anything!

Now, you can drive yourself crazy trying to figure out why God made his choices as he walked down the bread aisle of people, but we are not told why. We are told that he did. You who are in faith can take comfort in God's grace because it never depended on you, did not originate with you, cannot be attributed to you in even the smallest way! Because if any of that was the case, grace would no longer be grace. The comfort is found here in God's love, God's desire to always have people who love and trust in him. HE has preserved a remnant and you are part of that!

We take comfort that he sent the Holy Spirit to work faith in us—either in Holy Baptism or as we listened to the Word of God. And that faith centers on Christ and what he has done. Jesus actually earned our salvation by *his* works. He could and did keep the law perfectly as his Father looked on. He put that perfect life of his on the cross in order to shed his blood as the sacrifice for our sins. He beat sin and death for us. All the works that were necessary for anyone to be saved were done by Christ, not by us. God's choice. Christ's sacrifice. The Spirit's work.

There is so much comfort to be found in the fact that God has done everything needed for our salvation and has chosen us as the recipients of his grace! This is also comforting news to share with others—that it does not matter what their sins have been or how much good they haven't done or what terrible choices they may have made. We're not saved because of any of that in any way. We are saved by the love of God. He extends his love, his forgiveness for all sins, his desire that all would enjoy eternal life in heaven. We find comfort in this when we feel especially guilty over our sins or think that we're just not "good enough." Those feelings subside when you hear God say that he loves you just because he loves you. That's grace. You know people who would love to have the comfort we enjoy. Please take the opportunity to share that with them.

A Warning from Israel's History

And while that is happy news and incredibly comforting, we do find a warning here from Israel's history. **What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day." And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever."**

It's not that the people of Israel did not want to have God's forgiveness and eternity with him, it's that they looked at getting it in a way other than trusting God's love and promises. Instead of listening to what he said, they chose to work at it, thinking that they played a part in receiving those blessings. What they ended up doing was pushing God's grace aside. They were determined to earn God's love and a place in heaven with him by living a certain way, doing the right things, acting just so. This they thought was righteousness.

And that sounds good, in a way. But what it did was dismiss God's grace. They did not listen to what God was telling them. They continued to do this right up to the time of Jesus. And Jesus took to task the religious leaders who were doing this and telling people that this is what they had to do. Maybe you remember Jesus' final sermon on Tuesday of Holy Week where he chastised these people for their insistence on applying the law to everything in their lives, well beyond what God ever said. He could

see in their hearts how they were counting on their good works to save them. Previously he had told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector that pointed some of this out also. It was never about doing everything just so; it was always about a trust in God's grace and the forgiveness found there.

Before our lesson, Paul dove back into the Old Testament Scriptures to find the words which point out God's grace and Israel's stubborn refusal: **And Isaiah boldly says, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." But concerning Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people (10:20-21)."**

And so Paul says that those who rejected God's grace were hardened, God gave them over to their sin. In his divine justice, God finally said to those who continued to refuse his grace, *"Have it your way."* We dare not question God's wisdom, justice or timing in doing this. He is a God of perfect love and grace, a God who wants all to be saved, but many reject the way of salvation in Christ. Just as he finally hardened Pharaoh's heart in Egypt after he had so many chances to listen to God through Moses, God also eventually hardened the hearts and minds of those in Israel who did the same.

This still happens today, however you and I don't know when that has happened in a person's heart. So we dare not rush to judgment on a person who thinks they're going to heaven because they're "a good person" or they are "spiritual." We know that if that's what they continue thinking, Judgment Day will be an eternal disappointment on a scale we cannot imagine. BUT as long as they are in this world, they might be reached by God's grace. Only God knows who those people are, but he calls you and me to share with them the truth of God's grace. So one warning for us is not to sit around accepting that they are lost, but we are to share God's grace with them because we don't know the elect like God does.

The other warning is personal. Be careful. Be careful not to slip into thinking that we are saved because we do the things God wants. The act of going to church on Sundays doesn't save you; the Jesus you hear about here does. Serving God with your unique talents and time doesn't save you; the God who gave those to you does. Giving generous offerings back to God doesn't save you; the God who generously gave grace to you does. We don't earn a thing with all of that. We do all of that because God has chosen us to be his people and we want to thank him. Don't get it mixed around. Don't fall to the sin of those who refused grace.

Instead, take great comfort in the fact that God has chosen you to be his child. Rejoice in his grace, his undeserved love for you. And be a messenger of God's grace, sharing salvation through faith in Jesus with those around you because through that gospel, God calls his chosen ones to faith and salvation. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.