

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 the 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"? ⁴ And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." ⁵ So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶ And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. ⁷ What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, ⁸ as it is written:

*"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes so that they could not see
and ears so that they could not hear,
to this very day."*

⁹ And David says:

*"May their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them.*

*¹⁰ May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever."*

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. ¹² But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! (Romans 11:1-12)

Did God Throw Away his People?

Thursday morning was kind of busy. My wife was trying to shoo the kids out the door for school, so I ironed a shirt for myself. My wife usually does that for me and I appreciate it, but I can do it when I need to. I really didn't think any more about it until lunch time, when my wife saw the shirt I was wearing. She told me turn around. It was just as she suspected. That shirt had a stain on it. Because it's on the back, I didn't even notice and I kept on wearing it. I would've even worn it to administer a baptism that night, but I managed to spill my dinner down the front of it and make a whole new set of spots. I probably won't be allowed to wear that shirt again. The stain on one, small part ruins it, at least for more formal situations. So what's going to happen to it? Over the years, my wife has converted a number of ruined shirts into rags. It's that or throw them away. But it didn't used to be that way. A few generations ago, when cloth was more expensive and harder to come by, our ancestors saved what they could. Maybe they couldn't use it for clothing anymore, but they found other uses. My favorite is quilting. Many of our foremothers used remnants of cloth to make quilts that were full of family memories.

I.

Today St. Paul talks about a remnant – not a piece of cloth, but rather the remnant of God's people. He's answering a question that parallels the question of what to do with that stained shirt. We might paraphrase the question this way: **Did God throw away his people?** Paul's answer is no. Rather **God kept the remnant.**

He's talking about the people of Israel. Again and again, the Christian Church has wrestled with what Israel's relationship with God is in the New Testament era. In recent years, Christian speakers from the Vatican all the way to televangelists have addressed this question. For most of the church's history, Christians overstated the case and said that God rejected the people of Israel when they rejected Jesus. Now, in the very politically correct world we live in, very few churches would make that statement. Almost every group today says that Israel is still God's people and that implies that Jewish people are saved whether they actually believe in Jesus or not.

That, too, is an overstatement. Paul attempts to set us straight this morning. He asks, **"Did God reject his people?"** His answer is no. He himself was a Jew. Paul points back eight hundred years to the time when the prophet Elijah had served the kingdom of Israel. The king at that time, Ahab, and his wife, Jezebel, were idol worshippers. They did their best to wipe out the true faith in Israel. After one major confrontation, Elijah

wanted to die. The people had turned against the Lord. They had destroyed his altars and hunted down his people. And Elijah was convinced he was the only believer left. But God said, **“I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to [the false god] Baal.”**

That remnant – that tiny piece of the millions of Israelites in Elijah’s day – shows that God had not rejected his people because God is the one who gives faith. God reserved this remnant for himself. Even when the vast majority of the Israelites lived in open rebellion against him, God still worked. God still called and gathered. God still extended his grace to his people.

That situation is no different today. The real people of God is not the physical nation of Israel, and it never was. Even in the Old Testament, God makes a clear distinction between the nation as a whole and the remnant, the people who were faithful to him. To be a part of the remnant even in the Old Testament, you had to believe in Jesus as your Savior. From the time of Christ, the vast majority of the Jewish people have rejected him. But Paul says, **“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”**

God’s grace is the only reason anyone belongs to God’s people. That means that we dare not think that we earned that position. That was the heart of the Jewish rejection of Jesus. They thought they were better than other people because they followed all those Old Testament laws. God himself did give those laws. But the laws were intended to illustrate how much they needed God. They were intended to walk them through the work their Savior would do when he came. But the Jewish people misunderstood them. The truth is, they liked thinking of themselves as better. They liked looking at all they had done and thinking that it earned them something. All those sacrifices, all that good shellfish and pork they didn’t eat, all that resting on the Sabbath and bringing a tenth of their income – that all had to earn them some kind of points! They were sure of it.

So when Jesus said, “That does not get you into heaven. You have to be perfect or you’re going to hell,” that bothered them. Like human beings the world over, they didn’t want to accept that they couldn’t be good enough to get into heaven – or at least to help a little bit. So they rejected Jesus as their Savior. If Jesus had presented himself as an example, as a helper, as a role model or just as a prophet, they could’ve lived with that. But a Savior – that they just would not accept. Yet, in spite of that rejection, God has not thrown away his people. To this day, he works through the gospel and he calls even Jewish people to faith in Jesus. That is totally a work of God’s grace.

The sin of Israel is not unique to them. It’s the sin of people who are too impressed with their own efforts. Sometimes people talk about the zeal of the convert. A person who lives their whole life without knowing Jesus and then comes to faith sometimes has a much clearer understanding of how precious that gift is than a person who grew up hearing about Jesus. Now, that point can be overstated. But the kernel of truth is that people who grow up in Christian homes usually are taught to behave. So sometimes they don’t see their own sin as that big of a deal. It’s easy to rationalize pride and selfishness in a world full of child abusers and terrorists. It’s easy to compare ourselves to people who live much uglier lives than we do. It’s easy to shake our hands over all that’s wrong with the world and in the process assume that we’re better than those sinners.

But aren’t we? I do hope that we aren’t a bunch of child abusers and drug addicts and criminals. But our hearts are every bit as guilty as the hearts of the people we naturally look down on. In God’s eyes, pride and self-righteousness are just as evil as the horrible sins those people commit. If that pride rests unmolested in our hearts, if that sinful pride thrives there without constant repentance, we will begin to think that God chose us because we’re good people. We’ll begin to think we’re going to heaven because we show up regularly for church, because we write a big check to the church, because we behave ourselves. God does want us to do all those things! But when we think those things make us righteous, then we are idol worshippers. We are worshipping ourselves. No one who worships themselves is a part of the people of God.

But God knows that better than we do. Just as he sent his Son Jesus to pay for the pride and the self-righteousness of Israel, he sent Jesus to pay for those sins in us. If anyone ever deserved to worship himself, it was Jesus. But he always worshipped his Father. His perfect heart replaces ours in God’s record. On the cross, Jesus suffered the hell we deserve for all the times we bowed down to ourselves. Jesus died for every moment of pride we have ever been guilty of. And then he rose. In that resurrection, God says that our sin is gone. God says that we are free. God promises that he will treat us like he treats Jesus today: as his own children, as heirs of eternal life.

II.

Knowing Jesus made believing Jews the faithful remnant. Even before Jesus came, true believers looked forward to the Savior who would win forgiveness for them. Their faith continues in us today. You see, God did a miracle when Jesus came. God made the remnant bigger. God took the torn off scrap of cloth and he reweave it into a rich garment again. God added us to his people. Paul asks. **Did God throw away his people?** God's answer is no. Instead, **God enlarged the remnant into a new people.**

This whole discussion gets us into one of the more confusing doctrines of Scripture: the doctrine of election. What is an election? We're going to have one in just a few weeks. An election is a choice. Before the world began, God chose us to believe. But he did not elect us because he knew we would have faith. He did not chose the people who were the best or the most faithful or the most lovable. All of us are sinners. All of us deserve death and hell. But in pure, undeserved grace, God chose us to trust in Jesus as his Saviour. That's true whether we're talking about the remnant of Israel or the New Testament church today.

The confusing part is the flip side. God did not choose some people to go to hell. God did not sit back in eternity and pick people to be rebels, doomed to destruction. You can't even say that when God choose the believers, he passed by the others. I know that seems logical, but the Scriptures say that it is God's will and desire that all people be saved, that all people come to the knowledge of the truth and believe in Christ. We cannot understand how both things can be true, but it is what God says.

Paul says, **“What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened ...”** The Jews were trying so hard to save themselves that they missed Christ. In their pride, they rejected him. But the elect, the chosen remnant, believed, because God gave them faith. Those who were so invested in their own pride that they wouldn't listen, lost everything. God gave them over to their pride. He said, “You want to be pigs, then be pigs!” On Judgment Day, he will hold them accountable.

So Israel was reduced to mere remnant. But God wanted more than just a scrap of a people. Already in the Old Testament, he said that it was too small a thing for Jesus just to save Israel. He promised to expand his people to the ends of the earth. You and I are part of that expansion. God took all the leftover room in heaven and he gave it to us. God found us and he gave us faith. That too is God's grace.

The grace of God is endless. It is still reaching out to God's original people. God still loves Israel. Jesus still died for them – he died for all people everywhere. God is still calling them to return to him. What a gift it would be for you and me if they did. Being a part of this fellowship means that we share in the grace that God has given to each one of us. We benefit from the gifts he weaves into the garment we call the church. Every time he adds to that garment, every one of us is blessed. God is still reaching out to Israel. God is still reaching out to all those around us. He will continue to bless us with new believers until the Lord returns.

What a special garment God has made! When I was a teenager, my grandmother made this quilt for me. I've had it for a long time now and it's starting to get worn. But this is a true, hand sown quilt. When she gave it to me, I didn't really appreciate it, I'm sad to say. Only as an adult did I realize the effort that went into it and the dollar value attached to this kind of work. Only as an adult did I begin to treasure it. This quilt is a remarkable illustration of God's love. My grandmother took dozens of pieces of cloth and she sewed them onto the backing that holds the quilt together. That's what God has done for you and me. The backing is Israel. They and their Scriptures, the promises God gave to them that Jesus would come, that is the fabric that God sewed the New Testament Church onto. Sadly, he had only a piece of that fabric, only a remnant to work with. But to this day, he continues to add pieces to his quilt. Jews and Gentiles, Americans and Africans and Asians, people of every language and color, all coming to faith in Jesus as their Savior. You and I have our place in this quilt. Treasure this grace of God. Amen.