

## **ROMANS 11**

### **God is Patient and Forgiving, But Don't Push**

#### **Your Luck**

If you've been with us all through this series, you may recall that back in chapter 9 of Romans, Paul began this section with the tragic contradiction of Israel's condition. Although they were specially selected and privileged by God, they were disobedient and would not believe the writings of the Old Testament of the Bible. They took the truth of the Bible and manipulated its meaning for their own benefit and comfort. They refused to accept Christ as the promised Messiah which the Old Testament promised, in spite of undeniable proof, much like people have done in the Church with both the Old and New Testaments since the coming of Christ. Let's look this morning at the first ten verses of Romans chapter 11:

*1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people, the Jews? Of course not! Remember that I myself am a Jew, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin.*

*2 No, God has not rejected his own people, whom he chose from the very beginning. Do you remember what the Scriptures say about this? Elijah the prophet complained to God about the people of Israel and said,*

*3 "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I alone am left, and now they are trying to kill me, too."*

*4 And do you remember God's reply? He said, "You are not the only one left. I have seven thousand others who have never bowed down to Baal!"*

*5 It is the same today, for not all the Jews have turned away from God. A few are being saved as a result of God's kindness in choosing them.*

*6 And if they are saved by God's kindness, then it is not by their good works. For in that case, God's wonderful kindness would not be what it really is—free and undeserved.*

*7 So this is the situation: Most of the Jews have not found the favor of God they are looking for so earnestly. A few have—the ones God has chosen—but the rest were made unresponsive.*

*8 As the Scriptures say, "God has put them into a deep sleep. To this very day he has shut their eyes so they do not see, and closed their ears so they do not hear."*

*9 David spoke of this same thing when he said, "Let their bountiful table become a snare, a trap that makes them think all is well. Let their blessings cause them to stumble.*

*10 Let their eyes go blind so they cannot see, and let their backs grow weaker and weaker."*

In Romans chapter 11, Paul turns his attention to the natural consequences of Israel's

disobedience. Paul asks two questions. The first appears in verse one and the second appears in verse 11. In verse 1 Paul asks:

1) *“Did God reject His people?”*

Paul then answers his own question: *“By no means.”* Just because Israel rejected God, God has not rejected Israel. God has not abandoned the nation of Israel, because a small number of Jews did accept Christ and became Jewish Christian converts, as Paul shows in verses 1-10. In verse 11, Paul asks the second question:

2) *“Again I ask: ‘Did they (the Jews)<sup>1</sup> stumble so far as to fall beyond recovery?’ ”*

Again Paul answers his own question: *“Not at all.”* Israel’s fall is only to be temporary. There are going to be many more blessings for Israel as Paul explains in Romans 11:12-32.

We need to understand that the nation of Israel knew that God would never break His promises to them. Why? Because the Old Testament is filled with passages such as Nehemiah 9:21-32, where we see that God continually forgave Israel in spite of their disobedience.

And this is another of God’s promises. In 2 Chronicles 7:13,14, God says to His people, Israel:

*13 At times I might shut up the heavens so that no rain falls, or I might command locusts to devour your crops, or I might send plagues among you.*

*14 Then IF MY PEOPLE who are called by my name WILL HUMBLE THEMSELVES AND PRAY AND SEEK MY FACE AND TURN FROM THEIR WICKED WAYS, I WILL hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and HEAL THEIR LAND.*

In spite of the repeated disobedience of the Jewish people, God never broke His covenant, His promise to Israel, nor will He ever break it. Jeremiah 30,31 and Isaiah 14 tell us the very same thing. Will God cast away His people? No, he will never do that. Will He discipline them? Yes, He most certainly will.

In every generation in the history of the nation of Israel, there has always been a certain number of saved Jews. There is for the time being a temporary, partial, and purposeful setting aside of the nation of Israel. But it is not a total, permanent, and judgmental final setting aside.

So there are a small number of Jews today who are saved, and there is going to be a restoration in the future, which in fact will provide a blessing for the entire world. So let’s begin by looking at Romans 11:1-3:

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<sup>1</sup> parentheses added.

*1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people, the Jews? Of course not! Remember that I myself am a Jew, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin.*

*2 No, God has not rejected his own people, **whom he chose from the very beginning**. Do you remember what the Scriptures say about this? Elijah the prophet complained to God about the people of Israel and said,*

*3 “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. **I ALONE AM LEFT**, and now they are trying to kill me, too.”*

Paul begins by saying it is obvious that God did not reject the Jews. Because Paul himself is a Jew, and one who had for a long time persecuted Christians. So Paul wasn't rejected by God and Paul is a Jew, an Israelite. Paul is saved and is in the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps it would be helpful to those of you who aren't familiar with the covenant promise God made with Abraham to review it before going any further so that we might understand what Paul is talking about here in Romans 11. The covenant is not always an easy concept to understand, but let's give it a try. God's covenant contains 3 basic features:

1) God establishes the **covenant relationship** by making a promise which is solely an act of His grace. That is something He did in the past.

For example: God says to Abraham sometime around 2000 B.C. something like this: “*You will be the first in a line of many leaders of a great nation, which I will bless forever if you and they obey my commands* (Genesis 17:2-9).”

Which leads to:

2) The **covenant stipulations** or conditions upon which the covenant relationship between God and the people is maintained, and those are the commands of the covenant to be kept in the **present**.

For example: God told Moses and the people of Israel, who had been led out of bondage in Egypt, that the Ten Commandments and the laws He had given them are the commands which God had spoken about with Abraham (Exodus 19:3-8).

Which leads to:

3) The **covenant promises or curses** by which the covenant promise of God is fulfilled. The covenant is fulfilled by the people receiving either the blessings or the curses. Which of these they receive depends on whether they keep or do not keep the conditions of the covenant, and that fulfillment takes place in the future after God has determined if they have been obedient or disobedient.

We can simplify all 3 of these steps into something we might be better able to understand. God in effect makes a pledge that could go something like this:

*“I pledge to provide you with all the best life has to provide if you live within my will, trust in Me, and obey Me. If you live your life according to the rules I have laid down, then you will be richly blessed in life and you will be given eternal life in Heaven. If you disobey you will endure much suffering in life and spend your eternity in Hell. It’s your choice.”*

In Genesis 17:2-9, God speaks to Abraham and gives Him His promise which God will never alter or take back throughout all of history. God tells Abraham in verse 2 and 9:

**2 I WILL MAKE A COVENANT WITH YOU, by which I will guarantee to make you into a mighty nation.”**

**9 “Your part of the agreement,” God told Abraham, “is to obey the terms of the covenant. You and all your descendants have this continual responsibility.**

This is a promise God makes to Abraham and his descendants. Then about 500 years later, in Exodus 19:3-8, God concludes his discussion with Moses about the stipulations or conditions He is laying down in order for the covenant, or promise, with the people of Israel to be kept. God had given Moses the Ten Commandments and all 613 laws that the Israelites were to obey. When Moses presented these conditions to the Israelites, **they agreed** to accept God’s terms according to Exodus 19:3-8. In verse 8 they said:

*8 They all responded together, “We will certainly do everything the Lord asks of us.” So Moses brought the people’s answer back to the Lord.*

**Keeping the covenant** means responding by faith to God in every circumstance of your life and coming to God in repentance and forgiveness when you disobey.

Then in Deuteronomy 28, God spells out the **blessings we just spoke of** that will come from obedience and the **curses** that will result from disobedience, Deuteronomy 28:1,2,7-10,15,21,22,30,58-61:

We’ll read just a few of these verses to give you the general message.

### **Blessings Resulting From Obedience**

*7 The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways.*

*8 The Lord will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you undertake; he will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*

*9 The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways.*

### **Curses Resulting From Disobedience**

**15 But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:**

Then in Psalm 89:34, God says:

*I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips.*

God repeats this promise again in Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel 16:60.

In Ezekiel 33:11, God says to them:

*Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?*

Israel had been the chosen people of God, the people of His promise, a promise which God Himself declared to be unbreakable.

But God did make it clear that the promise was to those who believed and were faithful.

Those who rejected God and refused to obey Him were removing themselves from the blessings of the promise.

Romans 11:2 states that God “*foreknew*” the people of Israel which means He chose them as a people for a very special purpose. To foreknow something in this context is the knowing of **intimacy**, of a **close relationship**, of **love**. In Amos 3:2, we read:

*2 You only have I known of all the families of the earth.*

That doesn’t mean that God only knew about the people of Israel. It means that they were the only nation in the world with whom God established an intimate relationship.

The promise didn’t include all Jews in salvation (chapter 9). Nor does the punishment exclude all Jews from salvation (chapter 11). The promise included those that were willing to obey and trust God, people who were willing to make Jesus Lord of their lives (Romans 10). Paul is living proof that the setting aside of Israel in judgment is only partial. If any Jew deserved to be shut out for disobedience, it was Paul. But when Paul was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus, he believed and was saved. So the first proof that Israel’s setting aside is only partial is Paul himself. If a Jew today accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he/she will also be saved and become a part of the remnant that believes. That not only applies to the Jews today but to everyone else in the world. Belief in the work of Jesus is the only thing that will bring anyone salvation,

whether Jew or Gentile.

In verse 2, Paul refers to the situation in the Old Testament concerning Elijah. After Elijah's victory over the false prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel into the desert. Here's a man who wasn't afraid to stand up to 850 men and do battle with them, but one woman sends him running into the desert. Later Elijah hid in a cave on Mount Horeb, where he was in a state of total depression because his victory over the prophets of Baal had not brought about the revival he expected among the disobedient people of Israel. It was here that God spoke with him: Elijah speaks first, 1 Kings 19:14,15,18:

14 He replied again, "I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. **I alone am left**, and now they are trying to kill me, too."

15 Then the Lord told him, "Go back the way you came, and travel to the wilderness of Damascus. When you arrive there, anoint Hazael to be king of Aram.

18 Yet **I will preserve seven thousand others in Israel** who have never bowed to Baal or kissed him!"

God told Elijah he was wrong. He wasn't the only one left. God had seen to it that there was a remnant of 7,000 Jews who were faithful to him. The "*faithful remnant*" therefore existed way back in the time of Jeremiah, about 800 years before Christ. And just as there was a "*faithful remnant*" back in Jeremiah's time, there was also a "*faithful remnant*" in Paul's day as he was writing this letter to the Romans. Therefore God has not cast away His people, the nation of Israel, except partially. There are still some who believe and obey. In fact the remnant in Paul's day was probably a pretty sizeable remnant. James would soon tell Paul in Jerusalem that there were "*many thousands*" of believing Jews (Acts 21:18-20)

These are the two remnants that Paul is referring to in Romans 11:4,5:

*4 And do you remember God's reply? He said, "You are not the only one left. I have seven thousand others who have never bowed down to Baal!"*  
*5 It is the same today, for not all the Jews have turned away from God. A few are being saved as a result of God's kindness in choosing them.*

So there were believing Jews way back in Jeremiah's time as well as believing Jews in Paul's day in the mid first century. There has always been a remnant of believing Jews and there will always be a remnant of believing Jews right up to the end when Christ returns, and just before that time all of Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26).

The future salvation of Israel is repeated throughout the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Jewish teachers commonly said that "*all Israel will be saved*," but then went on to list which Israelites would *not* be saved: the phrase thus means "*Israel as a whole* (but

not necessarily including every individual) *will be saved.*” A good comparison here would be to think about someone saying that America is a wonderful country, but not meaning that all Americans are wonderful. In other words, the great majority of the surviving Jewish remnant will turn to faith in Christ during the Tribulation (seven year period preceding Christ’s return). Paul proves this point from Isaiah 59:20–21:<sup>2</sup>

*20 “The Redeemer will come to Jerusalem,” says the Lord, “to buy back those in Israel WHO HAVE TURNED FROM THEIR SINS.*

*21 And this is my covenant with them,” says the Lord. “My Spirit will not leave them, and neither will these words I have given you. They will be on your lips and on the lips of your children and your children’s children forever. I, the Lord, have spoken!*

The great majority of the Jews who are alive at this time will turn from their disbelief and accept Christ as Savior and be saved.

But until that time it will always be a remnant, a small surviving group of Jews, those who have kept the covenant by believing and trusting in God and Jesus Christ. Because there is always a remnant means that God has not cancelled His promise to Israel. When James wrote his epistle who do you think he was writing to? Listen to how James begins in James 1:1:

*1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

The Dispersion was the remnant of Christian Jews that had gone into all parts of the Roman empire.

When Peter wrote, who did he write to? 1 Peter 1:1:

*1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,*

Peter was writing as well to the remnant scattered all over the Roman Empire. The book of Hebrews was also written to Jews who believe in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

In every generation from the time God chose Israel as a special nation for a special purpose, He has determined that there will be at least a small number of people who will be faithful to Him. That selection is based on the response of faith, but it has been initiated by the sovereign plan of God.

And as Paul says at the end of Romans 11:5, the remnant was chosen by the grace of God.

Then in verse 6 Paul says:

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<sup>2</sup> IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL (1993).

*6 And if they are saved by God's kindness, **then it is not by their good works.** For in that case, God's wonderful kindness would not be what it really is—free and undeserved.*

God's grace has nothing to do with our good works. If God's kindness to us was based on the good things we did, then His grace would no longer be grace, because **grace MEANS THAT WE ARE GIVEN SOMETHING THAT WE DO NOT DESERVE**, something that we cannot earn. Salvation can only be granted by God through His grace. Our faith in Christ **DOES NOT EARN US salvation** and eternal life in Heaven. **SALVATION IS GIVEN US AS A GIFT FROM GOD WHEN WE BELIEVE IN THE SACRIFICIAL DEATH OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS FOR OUR SINS AND WE DECLARE THAT HE HAS AUTHORITY OVER OUR LIVES.** Faith will not earn us such salvation, but **it is a necessary condition** in order for God to bestow His grace on us. Salvation is based on God's grace, not on anything we do. I'll try and simplify that a little. When we believe in Jesus and declare Him to be Lord of our lives, we have opened our hearts to receiving the gift of salvation, and God **will give us that salvation** only if our declaration is for real.

If we think we can **earn salvation by faith**, we may declare that we believe so that we might be saved, and such faith may not be real. Only God can determine genuine faith from faith that is not truly genuine. I want to be very clear about this, however. If you believe that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for your sins and rose from the grave so that you might also have eternal life in Heaven forever, you are saved. Don't start second guessing your salvation. If, however, you think that you're saved because you go to church a couple of times a month, have been baptized and/or confirmed, are in your opinion a good person, light candles, you had better take a reality check, because you are not saved by those things. They will not do you any good when you stand before Jesus as He determines whether you will go to Heaven or Hell.

If you place anything above God in importance in your life, you are not saved. You must believe that God is in charge and allow Him to be in charge.

Therefore, it is clear in verse 6 that those who believed and placed Christ in charge of their lives were given salvation as a gift (grace) from God. In the same manner Romans 11:7,8 tells us that the unbelieving majority of Israel were hardened by God:

*7 So this is the situation: **Most of the Jews have not found the favor of God they are looking for so earnestly.** A few have—the ones God has chosen—but the rest were made unresponsive.*

*8 As the Scriptures say, "God has put them into a deep sleep. To this very day he has shut their eyes so they do not see, and closed their ears so they do not hear."*

The Jews were seen as continually trying on their own to make themselves right with

God even though they should have known there was no way that could be done. Such a goal is utterly impossible. Are you trying to get yourself right with God by the things you do? By going to church, by giving money to the church, or by serving on a committee. It won't work. The only way to get right with God is through His Son, Jesus. You must believe in His substitutionary death on the cross and place Him in charge of your life. Anything else is totally ineffective. That's why in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*" The scribes and Pharisees thought they were the most religious people in the world. They had no idea that their opinion of themselves wasn't going to do them any good. They weren't as righteous as they thought. Only those who obtain their righteousness through the sacrifice of Jesus can obtain the righteousness necessary to enter Heaven.

The "*elect*" or "*chosen*" in verse 7 doesn't have reference to the entire nation of Israel but to those who believed in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. As Paul said in Romans 9, "*Not all Israel is Israel.*" As he said in chapter 2, the true Jew is one who is circumcised in the heart, inwardly. The rest were hardened.

Do verses 7 and 8 mean that God just made some people not believe? We doubt that. Just as with the hardening of Pharaoh and others (Romans 9:17; 11:25), God gives people up to their own stubbornness and unbelief. This is a process that results from the willful rejection of true righteousness, a process of a personal rejection, time and time again by a person. What did Paul tell us in Romans 10:16? "*Not all have obeyed the good news.*"

That's the problem. In Romans 10:21, Paul told us that: "*But of Israel He (God)<sup>3</sup> says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'*" When God moves in with a judgmental hardening of someone's heart, it's as a result of a response of continual rejection of God's message on the part of the individual. God's hardening does not occur without the person first hardening themselves. God does not appear to harden anyone's heart unless they themselves have repeatedly rejected His message. It is the judgment of God on a person because of the repeated disbelief of that person (Proverbs 29:1).

Paul gets this from two Old Testament writings, both of which speak of "*eyes which cannot see.*" In Deuteronomy 29:2ff, Moses tells the Israelites that, although they have seen all of God's wonders, He has not given them "*a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.*" Paul also quotes from Isaiah 29:10, where Isaiah told the people of Israel that they had "*a spirit of stupor.*" This means they had a complete loss of any spiritual feeling toward God, which was **SELF-INFLICTED** before it became a judgment of God. It also tells us that the prophets gave warning that this was going to happen and when the Jews saw it happening they should have known that scripture was being fulfilled, and they should have repented and believed. Then we read in Romans 11:9,10:

*9 David spoke of this same thing when he said, "LET their bountiful table become a snare, a trap that makes them think all is well. Let their*

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<sup>3</sup> parentheses added.

*blessings cause them to stumble.*

*10 Let their eyes go blind so they cannot see, and let their backs grow weaker and weaker.”*

These 2 verses are difficult to interpret. But we know that Paul takes them from Psalm 69:9ff, which portrays the experience of a righteous person who is being persecuted. This victim prays that God will both defend him and that God’s judgment will fall on His enemies, Psalm 69:22,23:

22 Let their table be a trap for them, a snare for their allies.

23 Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually.

Psalm 69 and Psalm 22 are the most frequently quoted Psalms about the suffering of the Savior, Jesus. They are a lament of the suffering and pain of Jesus. In Psalm 69, David pronounces a curse on the enemies of God. These verses pray for judgment to fall upon the enemies of God; those that reject God; those who deny God His rightful worship. The judgment, therefore, that has come upon Israel fits right into the plan of God. Moses said it, Isaiah said it, and David said it.

You probably wouldn’t think there was any place safer than at your own table, right? It might be considered a place of pleasure, celebrating, feasting, and joy. David’s prayer, though, is for the table at which they sit to be the trap that catches them. Several images can come to mind regarding this verse.

One possible image is that of Jews at a feasting table, loaded with meats, cheeses, vegetables, and wine. If you recall, the Jewish manner of sitting at a table was to recline. This gives a view of being at ease and relaxed while one is consuming the banquet. This also implies affluence. Oh, how easy it is to be lying in the lap of luxury and paying more attention to that than to what is happening in reality. You feel all is well, while in actuality your enemies are creeping up outside the hall ready to attack you. You become indifferent and oblivious to the dangers around you. So you are blind.

Another possible image is the Jews feasting on the Word of God—the Law that God gave them to direct their lives, to help them to focus on Him, and to bring blessing to them. If you recall, the Scribes and Pharisees had taken the wonderful Law of God and “put a fence around it.” In other words, they had taken God’s directives and said they are so special and holy that it was important to set up more regulations in order to help people obey God’s law. These regulations became very tedious to adhere to and they had the effect of getting the Jews so hung up on every little detail of the Law and its interpretation that they failed to recognize the living Word of God when He arrived on the scene in the form of Jesus.

So the Law, or rather the Jew’s interpretations and additional regulations, became a trap for them, trapping them into legalism and ritualism, and blinding them to what was in

reality the fulfillment of the Law when Jesus arrived.

When you read David's words, it could sound like he was calling for payback time for the way the Jews have abused God and denied Him His rightful place. But notice the word, "let." This could possibly be taken as a request for retribution, but it also certainly implies what could well happen in the natural course of events as a consequence of the state just described. So it may well be that what is being said here is not so much that God is going to blind them and trap them, but more that they will trap and blind themselves by continuing these behaviors that ignore God. And if they fail to keep God in charge of their lives at all times, God will merely allow that process to continue and He will not intervene to halt it for individuals who have continually rejected Him and refused to be obedient to His Word (Proverbs 29:11).

You may be sitting there thinking, "*Boy those Jews sure were stupid. They just became so engrossed in their own blessings and behaviors that they missed all that God wanted to do for them. I'm sure glad I'm not like them.*" But hold on a minute! Maybe we are much more like them than we care to admit. Maybe we, like them, are also blind to what is happening.

For people today, it may not be so much that we are legalistic and absorbed with the Law of God, as were the people to whom Paul was writing. Many today who are attending Christian churches have declared their independence from law, legalism, and rituals. They have grabbed onto Christ's words, "*The truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32) and reveled in that idea. Look around you; in some situations we are so free from the law that we totally disregard any law. Freedom has become license. It has become a freedom that makes us think that perhaps we can interpret God's Word in a way that best fits how we want to live.

Or perhaps for some of us it is being lulled into a comfortable rut and blinded to spiritual things by our affluence and materialism. If someone is thinking, "*I'm not rich so I can't be guilty of materialism,*" quite the contrary. Not only is the person who buys every new electronic toy that comes out or who fills their closets with all the latest fashion trends vulnerable to being materialistic, but also the person who can't afford such things yet desires them strongly. We are materialistic if we find our comfort and security in things and possessions. We are materialistic if we fill our minds with dreams of all the things we want to have and if we spend a lot of our time scheming how to get those things, rather than spending our time doing things that please the Lord.

Verse 10 paints a picture of pain, grief, and someone who is blind trying to find the light. The Psalmist is crying out to God to blind them, bend their back. He's speaking of those who refuse to be obedient to God. This whole concept fills the New Testament: constant, frequent willful rejection results in a person being more and more blinded to God's truth and ultimately that individual will in turn be abandoned by God.

Yet there is hope. In the midst of a blind nation, God has always maintained a remnant of believers. The unbelief of the Gospel by the Jews doesn't in any way thwart the plan of

God, not in the least. God made a promise and He will fulfill it. Next week we'll learn more about God's ultimate plan for Israel.