

***All Roads Lead Here: The Remnant***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***September 17, 2017***  
***1 Kings 19:13-15a, 18; Acts 15:5-19; Romans 11:1-15***

Our final Scripture reading today is from Romans 11:1-15. May God add His blessings on the reading of His holy Word. "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. 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: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 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. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, 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." 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." 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. 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! 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. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"

When you were younger, did you ever reject something you later thought was fantastic? For my mother, it was pecan pie. When she was young, she thought it looked terrible and sounded disgusting. She wouldn't try it; wouldn't go near it. Then when she got older, when it was offered to her, she thought, "Well, I guess I'll try it once." Pecan pie turned into one of my mom's favorite desserts. For nearly twenty years, I didn't try rhubarb pie because I was told that it was awful. Tried it – it's one of *my* favorites. Sometimes, we have to see someone enjoying an item we thought we hated for us to try it again, maybe to find out we really like it.

At its core, that is one of two central themes we'll explore in today's passage. Paul wants us to have a solid theology of how God keeps a remnant of His people in all times by His grace, and how God has brought His people together not only in spite of but because of the rejection of the Israelites of Paul's day – a rejection that may one day change. These concepts interweave together, and by the end, we'll see how it affects our lives and our relationship with God too.

Paul has been talking at length for a while about salvation, predestination, and how they work together, and he's included the Jewish people in that conversation. He returns to that theme here because he is still deeply attached to his people and wants to see more and more of them believe in Jesus. That's not been happening, so the question comes up – has God rejected the people that He has watched over for well over 2,000 years? Has God finally gotten fed up and said, "No salvation for you!"?

Paul answers with a resounding “no.” Paul is Jewish, proving that there are Israelites who have come to believe in Jesus. And it’s important to note that Paul calls himself a descendant of Abraham going into this section, because that’s a reminder of the promises. God promised Abraham a great nation and descendants greater than the stars in the sky or the sands on the seashore. And because of that promise, God will always have in His elect Israelites of Abraham’s line.

There have been times when it was questionable whether or not anyone faithful was going to remain in Israel at all, or that the whole line of Abraham would be wiped out. Think back to the story of Joseph with me. Joseph endured incredible hardships – he was sold as a slave by his own brothers, imprisoned in Egypt for years despite doing nothing wrong. It makes you wonder what God was thinking. But Joseph is in the perfect place to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams about seven abundant years of harvest and then seven years of famine. It’s because of Joseph that there’s any food available at all in the region. When his brothers come to buy food in Egypt, Joseph eventually reveals himself to them and tells them not to be worried. God sent him ahead of them so that there would be a remnant of Abraham’s people.

This idea of the remnant comes upon many other times, but Paul mentions it with Elijah. Elijah had been facing off against the king of the northern section of Israel, King Ahab and Jezebel and the priests of their god Baal. And there’s an incredible display of God’s might and power – God sends down fire that destroys not only Elijah’s offering but the altar itself. It’s proof positive that God is true and Baal is false, and done in such an incredible way that no one could deny it. Despite all that, Jezebel wants Elijah dead that night.

And Elijah can’t take it. If the people of Israel won’t convert with his preaching, and they won’t convert after they see God’s mighty signs and wonders, what is he going to do? Is he the only faithful person left in Israel? And that’s when he complains to the LORD – “LORD, they’ve killed your prophets and destroyed your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me.” And God says, “Not so fast!” God says, “I have a group of 7,000 people that are still loyal to me – those who refuse to worship Baal.” God sends Elijah back out to do his job.

During the exile of the southern kingdom, there was great mourning – we’ve lost our land, we’ve lost our temple, we’ve lost our God. And once again, God says, “Not so fast!” After 70 years, the remnant that God preserved returns home to Israel and rebuilds the temple. During the time of Esther, God uses her and sends her into great danger to stop the genocide of her people. Through her, God once again saves a remnant.

God’s remnant of true Israelites became believers in Jesus in the first century. The vast majority of converts to Christianity were Gentiles, but some Jews still came to faith in Jesus. And just like in Elijah’s day, things were tough. Believers were kicked out of the synagogues. They were shunned by the community that had raised them. They were now sitting in worship with Gentiles, people they had been taught were evil and wicked and sinful – and fair enough, some of them had been before they came to know Christ. They didn’t have much in common with each other except their mutual faith...but it was enough.

And even today, God continues to provide a remnant for Himself out of the nation of Israel. It's tough work, but there are many Christian ministries in Israel today, headed by people of Jewish heritage, who strive to let their countrymen know that Yeshua was and is the promised messiah they've been taught to wait for all their lives. Not many come to faith in Jesus, but some do. God still keeps His promise to Abraham.

And as Paul has reminded us throughout Romans, God chooses that remnant by His grace. The Jews don't have a works-based way to get to heaven. God saves them by choosing them and bringing them to know His Son, by planting faith in them through the Holy Spirit so that when they hear of Jesus, they respond to Him. There is one salvation for all people that comes through faith alone, not by works. Paul needed to say that because some Jewish believers in the first century still thought they needed to follow the ritual laws that no longer applied. No, Paul replies, you are saved by grace. Grace by definition, Paul says, means that you can't work for it. God chooses some of Abraham's people to save in every generation.

Now this first half, this remnant, what does that mean for us? It says a lot about Israel, it says something about how God keeps His promises, but here's something we can take away for our everyday lives: *you aren't alone in your faith*. Sounds simple enough, right? You come here every week or so, you see friends who are believers, you worship, you meet with God, you learn about Him, you go back to your normal routine charged up for another week. You know you aren't alone in this.

But it doesn't always feel that way. You might work where your colleagues regularly make fun of religious people and trash anything moral. You might be dealing with a family that really doesn't understand why you'd want to be here every week. You might be attending school with classmates that have heard that religion is nothing but myths that contradict known facts. Especially when things are hard – when the dog dies or the friend betrays or the income stops – it's easy to think that you're all alone in your faith. And from the way people attack faith these days, it's not likely to get easier any time soon.

But you aren't alone. God always chooses a remnant of His people that He saves by His grace. You may not be in the same place as them; you may not always be in contact with them; but they are still there. When we pray for Pastor Andrew every week, still imprisoned in Turkey after a year, we pray for his health, his emotional state, his faith...perhaps the biggest thing is that we pray that he doesn't feel alone. There are people all over the world who have not forgotten him. There may not be another believer in that entire prison, but Andrew is not alone. He has the Holy Spirit, and people on the outside are still fighting for the faith.

When you feel like maybe you're clinging on to faith the way Elijah was, that no one's listening and you're not sure how you can go on, when you feel defeated, come back to your people. Come back to the church. Know that faithful Christians throughout the world stand with you. Not by our own might, but by God's grace, we stand in faith, and we do it together.

Now we come to the second part of the passage, the rejection of the gospel by Israel and the possibilities of later acceptance. The elect of Paul's day accepted the message, but Israel on the whole didn't accept her Messiah. That's part of God's plan.

The rest of Israel was hardened to Jesus. We see it in the gospels and we see it in Acts, where the Jewish leaders in particular have it out for Jesus and His followers. Did they harden their hearts towards Jesus' message of grace? Did God harden their hearts? The answer is yes, both. The Jewish authorities did nothing they did not want to do in rejecting Jesus, and yet that was God's plan all along. Paul quotes the Old Testament to show that Israel has long been rejecting God, so this is not a new thing, and it's not unexpected.

But why is this happening? Again, it's according to God's plan. God is not just saving those of us outside of the physical descendants of Abraham. He is using our acceptance of Jesus as our Messiah to change the mindset of the Jewish people. He is using our relationship with Him to make them jealous, to bring them to envy us, to bring them back to Himself. He didn't do it to cut off His people forever. Instead, He did it so that the Jewish people would see what they were missing. Their rejection of Jesus opened the door to us, and as they come back home to God and His Son, they enhance the Kingdom of God all the more.

Now this section might make us surprised. God wants to make Israel jealous and envious? That sounds sinful, or at least un-Christian. That's because we often take jealousy and envy to be forms of coveting, of wanting what isn't ours to have, of not being content with God's blessings. But this isn't it at all. In fact, jealousy and envy can be good and even holy when we understand them properly.

Did you know that God calls Himself a jealous God? He told the Israelites that they were His sacred possession, that He was jealous for them, that He would not let them have other gods or glorify anyone but Him because He was jealous for their love. And because God is righteous, His jealousy is a righteous jealousy – He only wants His due. When a husband or a wife makes promises at their wedding to forsake all others, it's appropriate for them to be jealous of their spouse's affections – not in a demanding or controlling way, as our human nature turns it around, but having pledged themselves to one another alone, to desire their loving faithfulness is natural.

Envy usually means I want what you have. Envy drives the American economy – you have an iPhone 6, I'm gonna get an iPhone 6+. You have a 2016 model, I'm gonna get a 2017. You have a big house, I'm gonna get one a bit bigger. Envy like that can lead us down a path of destruction. Churches that feed that sort of envy, that preach that you can be wealthy and comfortable in this life, don't preach the true gospel at all.

But if you envy godly things, godly ways, godly attributes, that's a good thing. They push us towards God. Friday at Presbytery I heard from a pastor who has taken homeless people into his home multiple times and I was scared of the concept, but I was also like, "That's amazing." I heard a report about our friends Sam and Crista who just celebrated their first year in Russia studying to reach out to the Tartar people, and I was like, "Wow, how amazing that God is working through them that way!" I hear of people's selflessness for the sake of Jesus and on my good days, I'm all like, "Give me more of that spirit, God!" That's appropriate envy.

In 1 Kings and 2 Kings, we read about the amazing prophet Elijah, and God had him appoint his own replacement, a man named Elisha. And when Elijah was about to be taken up by God into heaven, Elijah asked Elisha, “What can I do for you before you go?” And Elisha said, “Give me a double portion of your spirit.” Meaning, all the wonders you've done, all the faith you have, may I have double. And God granted that request because it was faithful. It was a holy envy, wanting more of God and God's provision and faith to follow Him.

So God brought the Gentiles into the Kingdom to make the Israelites jealous for Him. God wanted some Jews to say, “What are we missing that the Gentile Christians have?” And it was clear in the first two hundred years of the church that Christians had an amazing spirit. They were known among Jews and pagans alike for going into plague-filled areas that everyone was fleeing and helping the sick, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. They rescued infants left to die. They did not bow to Caesar and wound up slaughtered in the arena. Yet they kept their faith. That amazing love for God and neighbor impressed upon many non-Christians, Jew and pagan alike, that there was something divine going on in the lives of the Christians around them.

Now this passage is about Israel, and I don't want us to lose sight of that. But it also has a huge question for us to contemplate and to use to examine ourselves today: *who are you making jealous for God?* Who is it that sees your daily life and says, “I want what she's got?” “I need to know what makes him act the way he does.” What person sees how you deal with the stress and pressure and even tragedies and failures of your life and says, “They've got something that I don't have that helps them deal with the difficulties of life”?

When we think about the news, what is it? It's usually stories of people behaving badly, because we've come to expect that, and it sells. But much more seldom do you hear the amazing story of someone doing something great – giving a waitress a \$500 tip or rescuing a child from a burning building. Those are unexpected because they are rare. And being kind and generous because of your relationship with Christ isn't going to make CNN. Everyday kindness is strange and unusual, but the world is too self-absorbed to notice.

But not everyone is. If you live out the fruit of the Spirit, if you show joy and peace and love and kindness and goodness on a regular basis, someone will notice. Maybe it will just be your kids, but it will probably be others. They may not mention it or ask you about it; they'll still know. And if you're upfront about your faith – not pushy, not preachy, but enough that people who know you a bit know you're a Christian – it's all the more likely that they will put 2 and 2 together. They might have once rejected Jesus, or church, or who they thought God was. But just like the pie examples we talked about up front, where we came to love something we thought we hated, because of your care for them, they might try again. Eventually, that jealousy for your relationship with Christ may turn them towards Him. We can pray that holy envy will get the best of them and that through it, God will bring them into His family.

Friends, God preserves a remnant of His people at all times throughout history, which means that you are never alone in your faith. His love remains true always. And He reaches far and wide into the world to choose His people from among every nation, leading some to Himself with that holy envy. May He use us to stir up the hearts and minds of people around us that they too might come to trust in Jesus and find His precious salvation.