



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Romans 11:1-6

“Is There Jewish Christianity Today?”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our subject for our next few sessions together is “The Apostle Paul and the Purpose of the Ages.” And we're turning to Romans chapter 11 and looking at this marvelous chapter in a series of our studies here in this particular radio class. The subject for today as we look at Romans chapter 11, and verse 1 through verse 6, is "Is There Jewish Christianity Today?"

The question of Israel's place in the divine purpose has rarely been as relevant to life on this planet as it is today. Standing at the critical center of the political and military uncertainties and anxieties of the nations is the Nation Israel. Theologians of different persuasions recognize this fact. Professor G. C. Berkouwer, one of the really notable Christian theologians of the twentieth century, in his book "The Return of Christ," although denying in it that Israel the nation has an ethnic future, yet feels it necessary to explain why he must devote a chapter to the nation in his work. He finds justification for discussing Israel and the future in two things, the renewed attention given to Israel on account of the tragic outbursts of anti-Semitism in our age and the rise of the Jewish state in the land of Palestine.

The issue of Israel rises constantly in our newspapers as they seek to report the life of the globe. When President Reagan visits an un-denazified German cemetery in a

state that is not now the state of Hitler, Hitlerism abounds in our world by another name, communism, the issue of Israel is again highlighted before the Western world as we reflect upon the demonic evil of the holocaust.

For the study of the divine purpose in Israel in the New Testament revelation, one must first and foremost consider Paul's great chapters in his Epistle to the Romans. It is in this letter alone that the apostle discusses thematically the future of Israel. The discussion is found in Romans 9 through 11, and the reason for it is found in the subject matter of Romans 1 through 8. While the entire epistle is an exposition of the gospel, chapters 1 through 8 form the doctrinal heart of the soteriology of Paul.

The theme of the epistle is found in Romans 1:16 and 17 highlighted in his citation of Habakkuk chapter 2 and verse 4, "The just shall live by faith." In other words, righteousness, Paul says, is the gift of God through the objective merits of the saving cross of the Lord Jesus Christ appropriated by the exercise of personal faith.

Romans 1 through 8, developing the details of the theme, set forth an elect group justified by faith in the Lord Jesus. A Jewish reader, however, familiar with the Old Testament revelation, would have noticed a seemingly unusual thing. Israel appears to be missing from the elect group. While there is a brief mention of the problem of Israel in 3:1 through 8, otherwise, the nation has apparently been neglected by Paul in Romans.

"Was not Israel God's elect people, recipients of the covenants and promises?" one might ask. How can any teaching have divine approval that does not reserve for Israel a preeminent place? To the Jew the issue would seem to be this: Either Paul's gospel is true and the covenantal promises are nullified, an answer offered by a number of otherwise orthodox Christian interpreters today. Or Paul's gospel is false with Christ an imposter and the promises still remain to be fulfilled. The apostle, as we shall see, has a surprising solution. The gospel he preaches is true and the promises will be fulfilled. To put it very simply, both and, and not either or, is his answer to the problem.

Paul makes three points in Romans 9 through 11. First, in chapters 9 through 10, expounding divine sovereignty and human responsibility in Israel's history, he makes the point that Israel's failure was caused by spiritual pride and self-sufficiency. In chapter 11 verses 1 through 10, Paul makes the point that Israel's failure is not total. The doctrine of the remnant makes this clear. And third, by the skillful use of Scripture supported by example and logic, he claims that the failure of national and ethnic Israel is not final. This is his point in verses 11 through 27.

The conclusion was foregone from his earlier intimations. One might look at this point at chapter 3, verse 1 through verse 4. There is coming a time when all Israel shall be saved; the glorious promises of the Old Testament regarding her destiny shall have their brilliant fulfillment.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote of those who see no real fulfillment of the great national promises in these words, "I cannot understand how you theologians and preachers can apply to the church, or multiplicity of churches, Scripture promises which in their plain meaning apply to God's chosen people Israel and to Palestine and which consequently must still be future." He goes on to say, "The prophetic books are full of teachings which if they are interpreted literally would be inspiring in a magnificent assurance of a great and glorious future, but which as they are spiritualized, become farcical. As applied to the church, they are a comedy."

What it ultimately comes down to is the faithfulness of a sovereign God to the promises and affirmations of his word. Isaiah says it forcefully and beautifully in words given him by the Lord, "My counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure." Notice Isaiah 46 and verse 10.

With that text ringing in our minds, let us turn to the text of Romans 11 considering first the opening six verses under the title "Is There Jewish Christianity Today?" And the chapter begins with the Pauline question of verse 1.

Now this question has its source in the context specifically in chapter 10 and verse 21. The question that opens the chapter is a very natural one in the light of the context. The apostle has just concluded chapter 10 by saying, "But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people," chapter 10 and verse 21. The words are a citation from Isaiah chapter 65 and verse 2, and the reference, of course, is to the long-suffering patience of God with his rebellious elect people.

The condition that characterized the people in Isaiah's day still persists in Paul's day. What more natural question to ask at this point than, "I say then, God has not cast away his people, has he?" The connection made by Paul is important for the ensuing discussion. First, the inferential conjunction "then" makes it plain that the question arises out of the statement in chapter 10 and verse 21. That fact is of further importance, for it clearly indicates that the sense of the word "people" in Isaiah 65:2 and Romans 10:21 is the sense that the same word must be given in Romans 11:1 and 2. And the sense of the term is plainly ethnic Israel. Thus the opening words of Paul give his readers the intimation of the major point of the following argumentation. God has not cast off his elect people, although the mass of them are at the moment abiding in unbelief.

That which is suggested by the question is stated directly and positively in the words that open verse 2, "God has not cast away his people whom he foreknew." Now this particular idea has its roots in the Old Testament, and that's the final point that we want to make at this point in our study. The expression "his people" lets the perceptive reader know what kind of reply the apostle expects. When God takes a people to himself, it is forever. He would not call Israel his people in the present age if he had indeed cast them off. And if anyone should call for further evidence, let him know that what Paul anticipates in his question, namely that God will not cast away his people, is stated without qualification three times in the Old Testament as a fact. I look down right at this moment at my desk at Psalm 94 and verse 14 and read these words, "For the LORD will not cast off his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance."

Now Paul gives the answer to his question. And the answer is, as one might expect first of all, a direct denial. The explicit answer of the apostle to the question is "God forbid," as flat and emphatic a denial as one might imagine. If God were to forsake his people, then he would become a liar, a covenant breaker. Can the only one who is absolutely honest and true be that? There may have been changes in the divine economy at particular times. There are no longer blood sacrifices. The Levitical cultus is gone and the temple worship, but there are none in the promises of God.

Now the apostle in answer of the question turns to his own situation in the end of chapter 11 and verse 1 and the beginning of verse 2. He further explains why God has not cast away his people before introducing his second answer, his own salvation. God's trustworthiness and faithfulness to his promises is proved by the Damascus road experience. And one might add, if God had cast away Israel, would he have chosen one of them to be his special apostle to the Gentiles?

Paul also mentions his membership in the tribe of Benjamin, a tribe of which one scholar says, "The Benjamites were the Israelite aristocracy." Benjamin did not follow the defection of the ten northern tribes after Solomon's death and the setting up of the schismatic altars, the alien priesthood and the temples at Bethel and Gilgal. Little Benjamin, as David described the tribe in one of his psalms, was given one of the most spiritual of blessings by Moses in his great song of Deuteronomy 33. Moses said, "The beloved of the LORD shall dwell in safety by him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders." After the exile, Benjamin with Judah constituted the theocratic people.

What Paul indicates by his own salvation is stated categorically in the opening sentence of verse 2. The further description of God's people "whom he foreknew" is of considerable interest doctrinally. Practically all of the sound and recent commentators on the Greek text affirm that the verb "to foreknow" is used in the Semitic sense of to choose in advance. One might turn to Jeremiah chapter 1 and verse 5, or Amos chapter 3 and

verse 2, or Hosea chapter 13 and verse 5. If the word meant simply to know beforehand in the sense of knowing beforehand that they would eventually believe, then the question "Has God cast off his people?" could not arise.

Of course, one could say they are not cast off for he knows they shall believe. If however, the word means to choose in advance, then the question could arise. The matter could be put this way: Yes, God did elect Israel, but Israel has fallen into unbelief. It would be natural then for someone to ask, "Are not the promises then canceled by her unbelief?" It's plain then that to foreknow here means to foreknow in the Semitic sense of entering into intimate relations with someone beforehand or to choose in love. We might even say to fore-love.

Arthur S. Way, the great classical scholar who translated so many of the important Greek and Latin works into English, translated the epistles of Paul and Hebrews too. At this point his translation practically equates the word foreknow with one of Paul's other words of election, to foreordain. He renders the last clause "whom he marked out for his own so long ago."

God then is not fickle, although he has had a plan within a plan. He intends to bring Israel to her promises, but the way includes the present time of Gentile blessing also.

Now, the apostle will speak of that in verses 11 through 15, and we will look at that in one of our studies in the next second or third study from this particular one. The apostle in verse 2 near the end of the verse through verse 4 of chapter 11 looks at the parallel between the day of Elijah and his own day and seeks to argue his point that God has not cast away his people from that particular passage.

As Lute, one of the Swiss commentators suggests, someone might say of the citing of the salvation of just one man Paul, "One swallow does not make a summer." So, Paul continues his argument with an illustration from Elijah's life and times. In the day of Elijah, a day of Israel's backsliding like the present time, apostasy was general, but not

universal. That is the case today. While the prophet thought he was alone in his faith, God reminded him vividly that he had reserved for himself seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. The words, "I have left for myself" must not be overlooked in Paul's paragraph here. It plainly indicates that the ground for the existence of the believing remnant in Elijah's day is the initiative of divine grace, God's gracious election and not human merit.

So often we overlook these points, but listen to what Paul says. He says, "I have reserved to myself seven thousand men." Notice that expression, "I have reserved for myself." In other words, as I have just said, the initiative in the salvation of the seven thousand, as the initiative in the salvation of any man at any time in God's ages, is traced to the initiative of the Lord God himself. Salvation begins in the heart of God. It does not begin in the heart of man. That is fundamental to an understanding of the grace of God.

Thus, just as the existence of a remnant, the product of divine grace, indicated to Elijah that God was still active in the nation's behalf, so in Paul's day, the apostle points out the body of believing Jews was a pledge of God's continuing commitment to his ancient promises of elective grace. His conclusion is reached in the 5th verse, "Even so then," he writes, "there is at the present time a remnant according to the election of grace."

Paul, admitting that general apostasy exists in his day, still argues for the existence of a remnant of Israelite believers for God's continued committal to them. The unbelief of the mass does not annul his faithfulness to his Messianic promises. And the existence of a remnant is a testimony to his continued activity in Israel's behalf. And the fact that it is a remnant that exists by divine grace proves the point. The remnant in verse 5 corresponds to the seven thousand of Elijah's day. The word in the original text was suggested by the expression that he used in verse 4, "I have reserved." It comes from the same Greek root that that verb "I have reserved" comes from. So, remnant and reserved refer to the same

thing. In Elijah's day, there was a remnant, and Paul insists that in his day, there is a remnant.

In Galatians 6:18, Paul refers again to the remnant of Jewish believers in the present age using the words "the Israel of God." The fact the Israel of God still exists today in the Christian church in the form of Jewish believers in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah is what Paul wants to make as his point.

In theological seminary I was taught Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and Syriac, in addition to the exegesis of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament by Dr. Charles L. Feinberg, the well-known Bible teacher and scholar and fervent believer in our Lord as Israel's Messiah. I've had the privilege of teaching one of his sons in seminary and then serving with him and his brother on the faculty of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. They belong to the Israel of God, true Jews for Jesus.

When Paul says the remnant is the result of the election of grace, he has in mind the heretical viewpoint that one may stand before God by another standard, namely by the keeping of the Law of Moses. Paul has strongly denied this way all through the Epistle to the Romans up to this point. He's made the point that to him that worketh not but believeth, to that one the righteousness of God is imputed.

The principles of law and works are diametrically opposed to the way of grace and faith. The former principles contend that man can by his deeds win a just reward for them from God. The idea of grace, however, is that God initiates the saving activity within his own divine being of love and mercy and that he consummates the work of salvation in our hearts by effectual grace, regeneration and faith grounded in the merits of our Lord through his atoning work on the cross. The two ideas of law and grace, or works and faith, cannot be harmonized with the biblical teaching that as the psalmist and Jonah affirms centuries ago under divine inspiration "Salvation is of the Lord."

Let us note that again, "Salvation is of the Lord." The ultimate decision that issues in our salvation comes from the heart of God as a thoughtful consideration of such

passages as 1 Corinthians 2:14 and Romans 8:7 and 8, which show man's inability, will point out.

Now the conclusion is explained in the 6th verse where the apostle writes, "And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace." This 6th verse explains the negative implications of verse 5. If the remnant has come into existence by elective grace, then it follows that it is not come into existence from the sinless obedience of human works as the law requires. If election were based upon obedience, then God's grace would no longer be unmerited favor, but justice. Who would desire to attempt to stand under that standard? What hope then would exist for sinners? And Scripture sets out that we're all sinners and have failed.

Augustine was right in once saying, "Gratia nisi gratis sit non est gratia" or "Grace, unless it should be free, is not grace." Our election and salvation then is not based upon works, nor even foreseen faith, or works produced by us, but upon the sovereign good pleasure of God. Paul makes that clear in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 3 through verse 6. I recommend that you study and meditate upon those verses. You might also look at 2 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 9. Otherwise, grace is no longer grace. But the Scriptures say it's by grace that we are saved.

Paul's appeal to sovereign grace as the source of all our spiritual blessings from God is not popular in our time. And unfortunately, it is inadequately treated in evangelical churches. The aversion of the age to rigorous thinking, evident in so many areas of modern western society, has found a ready ally in Christian congregations where the shallow has replaced the substantial in the ministry of the word. It is not uncommon to hear believers affirm that Pauline doctrine is a bit too heavy for our day. How sad.

Paul, heavy and unintelligible? Listen to the sturdy Scot, James Denney, "To say that Paul is unintelligible," he writes, "or that he presents Christianity in a way which does it every kind of injustice and is finally unacceptable to us is to fly in the face of history and experience. There have always been people who found Paul intelligible and

accepted the gospel as he preached it. There are such people still, if not in theological classrooms, then in mission halls, at street corners, in lonely rooms. It is not historical scholarship that is wanted for the understanding of him and neither is it the insight of genius. It is despair. Paul did not preach for philosophers, he preached for sinners. He had no gospel except for men whose mouths were stopped and who were standing condemned at the bar of God. They understood him, and they find him eminently intelligible still. When a man has the simplicity to say with Dr. Chalmers, 'What could I do if God did not justify the ungodly?' he has the key to the Pauline gospel of reconciliation in his hand."

Those are marvelous words from Dr. Denney, and they express so plainly and clearly the fact that if a man does not have the moral understanding of himself as a sinner before God, naturally he will not be responsive to the gospel of Christ because the gospel of Christ is given to sinners.

For those however who do understand their true nature before God, a God who demands infinite perfection in order to be justified before him, well, when we understand exactly what we are before God, we then see our case is hopeless apart from the grace of God through Jesus Christ. And we look off to the cross, and there we see the Son of God suffering the penalty of the broken law for us, and dying under the judgment of God that sinners might be saved.

Hallelujah, what a marvelous thing it is to read in the Scriptures that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and we may be justified through faith in him.

In conclusion then, what can we say to our question "Is there Jewish Christianity today?" The answer is plain and Pauline, yes. And the existence of a number of Jewish believers today argues for God's determination to fulfill the ancient national promises made to the nation. We might add that this Israel of God professes the same faith that we Gentiles profess. And they have no difficulty, but rather joy and pleasure in singing "Could my tears for ever flow, Could my zeal no languor know, These for sin could not

atone; Thou must save, and thou alone: In my hands no price I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling."

Or perhaps they would rather affirm their hope in their own traditional language, "My soul shall make her boast in the Lord, the humble shall hear thereof and be glad," Psalm 34:2. We Gentiles who've been saved sovereign grace love that too.

We continue our studies in our next session under the title "The National Numbness – the Bequest of God." We look forward to seeing you then.