

Romans Part 2

How to be a Christian without Being Religious!

Lesson 5: Israel's rejection of the Gospel is the Gentiles' Gain! (Romans 11:1-16)

Dr. Tim Keller writes,

God chooses those he will save through faith in the gospel. We are responsible for our rejection of him and his gospel. So the Jews are responsible for their refusal to turn to Christ; and they have not come to faith because God has not chosen to have mercy on them. That is a summary of the teaching of Romans 9 – 10. But therefore the question remains: “Did God reject his people?” (11:1). Did God reject ethnic Israel? After all the promises God made to Abraham and David, and so many others throughout Israel’s history, why doesn’t God turn their hearts to him? Has he now utterly abandoned them? Paul immediately answers the question with a big NO! The rest of Romans 11 details why he answers NO—and his central argument is: God has not rejected Israel, because Israel’s unbelief is not total.⁹

According to Keller, in verses 1-6, Paul uses four arguments to support his conviction and belief that God has not totally rejected Israel (the Jews).

1. Paul uses himself.
2. Paul uses the doctrine of election.
3. Paul uses Elijah.
4. Paul uses the doctrine of grace.¹⁰

Let’s consider each of these separately.

PAUL

Paul’s first argument refuting God’s rejection of Israel comes from his own life. Paul states that he is an Israelite himself, a descendant of Abraham and from the honored tribe of Benjamin. Paul was a very religious man, who pursued a righteousness with God through his own efforts just like the vast majority of Jews. Paul writes about himself in Philippians 3:4-6: “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.” If anyone could have obtained favor with God through works, it was Paul. He was completely

⁹ Keller, 85.

¹⁰ Ibid., 85-86.

zealous for God and meticulously kept the law—externally. Paul’s life illustrates perfectly that God was not finished with his chosen people—the Jews. Paul was chosen by God’s grace. He came into the favor of God, not through righteous living, but, by grace alone. The Lord chose Paul when he was en route to destroy the church in Damascus. Thus, he serves as an ongoing example that God has not, nor will He ever, totally reject Israel.

ELECTION

In addition to Paul’s Jewish heritage, he refutes God’s rejection of Israel based on the doctrine of election. In Romans 11:2, Paul writes, “God did not reject his people, whom he **foreknew**.” The word “foreknew” is very important to understand. This word, according to many theologians, means that in eternity past, God chose those who would belong to Him, and He **knew** them as part of His family, even before creation. The *NIV Study Bible* commentary on Romans 8:29 states, “They [theologians] hold that God not only knew us before we had any knowledge of him but that he also knew us, in the sense of choosing us by his grace, before the foundation of the world.”¹¹ There is plenty of mystery in the doctrine of divine election, mystery beyond human understanding. We can go no further than Scripture takes us in our intellectual and spiritual pursuit of understanding. In Ephesians 1:4-6, Paul writes, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and good will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” In Romans 11, Paul declares simply that God has foreordained to bring many Jews into His family by divine election and according to His grace and mercy. Jews who believe do so because they were first chosen by God before time.

The great hymn by Oliver Holden, *All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name*, puts forth this same truth:

*Ye chosen seed of Israel’s race, ye ransomed from the fall,
Hail him who saves you by his grace, and crown him Lord of all.
Hail him who saves you by his grace, and crown him Lord of all.*

ELIJAH

Next, Paul uses Elijah to demonstrate God’s continuous love of Israel. In verses 2-4, Paul writes, “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

¹¹ Kenneth Barker, *The NIV Study Bible New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 1718.

reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”” What is Paul saying? He is declaring this truth: Concerning Israel, there was and always will be a believing remnant. That was true during the days of Elijah; it was true during the early days of the church; and, it is still true today. Keller expounds, “In other words, there has always been in Israel a ‘faithful remnant,’ the spiritual Israel within Israel—even during times when it seemed that Israel had utterly rejected God, and he them.”¹²

GRACE

Paul’s fourth and final defense for God’s consistent love of Israel is grace. In verses 5-6, Paul declares, “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.” Wow! These are amazing truths that can be understood only by true believers. Why? Because “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Today, there is a remnant of Jews, around the world, that truly believes Jesus is their Messiah, and they boldly declare the gospel to other Jews. This remnant, like all believers, has come to understand that salvation comes by faith alone, through grace alone, and it has nothing do with good works. According to Isaiah, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isaiah 64:6). A proper understanding of exactly how filthy our sins really are enables us to see clearly how amazing God’s grace really is.

There are really only two ways to come to God—either by works or by grace. If by works, then one must be perfect. No sin can come into the presence of God who is holy. Therefore, no one can come into God’s presence unless their sins have been forgiven. This is why Jesus went to the cross—to deal with our sin problem. Thus, God provided a way, through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, for sinful man to be made righteous—by faith through grace. Romans 3:22-25 provides clarification. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” In essence, these four verses in chapter three summarize the redemptive narrative of God found throughout the entire Bible. This was God’s plan from the very beginning—to send His Son to die for the sins of the world. 1 Peter 1:18-20 state, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” All the religious ceremonies, upon which the Jews relied to make them righteous, could not do that. Neither could all of their so-called righteous acts. Nothing but the blood of Christ

¹² Keller, 86.

can atone for sin; His atonement becomes our atonement when we place our faith in Christ, in His death and resurrection, and surrender our lives to Him (Romans 6:5-6).

So then, there truly is no difference between Jew and Gentile when it comes to salvation. We must all come to the cross of Christ by faith, and this door has been opened to all through grace. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Thus, Paul reveals that there is a remnant of Jews who have come to understand this truth—salvation comes by faith alone through grace alone. Keller explains, “Paul means this: what guarantees that there will always be a faithful remnant is not that there is always a set of good, decent people who will believe, but rather that there is always the grace of God. It is God who preserves a remnant. Those who believe do so entirely because of grace.”¹³

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Jews have never come to believe this, even though they have heard the gospel and understood it. Why? Paul gives the answer.

HARDENED HEARTS

Israel’s problem was not that they had not heard the gospel. Romans 10:18 confirms that they had! Israel’s problem was not that they did not understand the gospel. According to Romans 10:19, they should have understood! They knew that Abraham believed God and was credited with righteousness because of his faith (Genesis 15:6). The sacrificial system that Moses established pointed to a coming sacrifice for their sins. They had the words of the prophets, who told of the coming Messiah who would die as this sacrifice (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53). They heard and should have understood. So, why did they refuse to believe Jesus? What was Israel’s real problem? The root problem for Israel was, and still is, pride. Pride is the product of religion that is devoid of faith and truth. Religion says, “Do!” but as we have already learned, there is nothing anyone can do to earn God’s favor. Israel pursued the “doing” with great zeal! Romans 11:7-8 state, “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’” (emphasis mine).

Romans 10:3 states, “Since they [the Israelites] did not know the righteousness that comes from God and **sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness**” (emphasis mine). The same can be said of many church members today. They seek their own righteousness rather than imputed righteousness that comes from God. In Romans 1:17, Paul begins his whole case concerning true righteousness: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, **a righteousness that is by faith** from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (emphasis mine). Religious people have a very difficult time accepting the notion that salvation is so simple. They feel like they must do something to earn it. Thus, they stumble over the simplicity of the gospel in contrast to the Jews,

¹³ Ibid., 86.

who stumbled over the repugnant idea that a man who died on a tree as a common criminal was their promised and long-awaited Messiah. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” This stumbling block proved to be too big of a hurdle for most Jews to cross.

Israel’s chief problem was a prideful heart that led to disobedience and abstinence (Romans 10:21). And, because of their refusal to believe, at some point God hardened their hearts and blinded their “spiritual eyes.” This same blindness and stubbornness continue today. Romans 11:8 confirms, “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.” Thus, the hearts of most Jews became hardened such that God “darkened their eyes so they could not see, and bent their backs forever” (verse 10). Stott writes, “From the Isaiah text Paul quotes only the first sentence, to the effect that God has given them *a spirit of stupor*, a complete loss of spiritual sensitivity which (as the context makes clear) was self-induced before it became a divine judgment.”¹⁴

Warning: Be careful if you continue to hear the gospel yet stubbornly refuse to truly surrender your life to Jesus Christ. At some point, those who continue in unbelief become divinely hardened. For this reason, Jesus said, “To whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48)!

ISRAEL’S FUTURE

So, what does the future hold for Israel? Keller writes,

The question in verse 11 is essentially the same as the one in verse 1. Has Israel, because of their rejection and God’s retribution [divine blindness], fallen “beyond recovery?” And the answer is the same: “Not at all!” In fact, the way that the gospel has been received by Jew and Gentile is all part of God’s sovereign plan—a plan that includes Jews coming to faith, not just non-Jews. In verses 11-16, Paul sets out three stages that Israel will go through with regard to the gospel of Jesus:

In the first stage, Israel “transgress[ed]” (v. 11-12), but it brought salvation to the Gentiles. This is fascinating. Paul means that, though many Jews believed, there was a lot of hostility to Christianity among the majority of Israel. If this had not happened, the early Jewish Christians could have easily concluded that the gospel was only for ethnic Israel; and there would have been little impetus to preach the gospel to anyone else.¹⁵

Keller continues,

¹⁴ Stott., 293.

¹⁵ Keller, 89.

In the second stage, the Gentiles make Israel “envious” (v. 11). Paul goes on to say that one of the goals of his ministry is to make his own people “envy and [therefore to] save some of them” (v. 14).¹⁶

What is the connection? Keller explains,

Here, then, is a remarkable insight. Just as the Gentiles could only have heard because Israel largely rejected Christ, now the Jews can only believe because those who accepted Christ were largely Gentiles. In other words, the Jews will see many Old Testament promises fulfilled in the Gentiles, and believe.¹⁷

What about future generations? Keller notes, “Finally, Paul speaks of a third stage sometime in the future. In the second stage, the envy of Israel only wins ‘some of them’ (v. 14). But Paul envisions a time of greater riches (v. 12), of acceptance (v. 15). He’ll go into more detail on what this stage looks like in verses 25-27.”¹⁸

Many theologians believe Romans is the best book in the Bible for understanding the eternal plan of God to save people from their sins. God’s plan began by selecting a group of people whom He would bless and from whom He would bring forth the Messiah—the Savior of the world. That blessed group of people are the Jews. From them, the world has received the eternal Word of God and the eternal Son of God! In the mysterious wisdom of God, He chose to harden the Jews’ hearts and blind their eyes in order that the gospel might spread to the Gentiles. In so doing, God knew the Jews would long for what the Gentiles received—a relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. The envy of the Jews has been partially aroused and some have believed. In the future, many, many Jews will long to be saved as many Gentiles have been. And they will turn to Jesus and cry out, “The Lord is our God!” Zechariah 13:1 and 9 state, “On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity... They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’” And when the Israelites turn to Jesus *en masse*, it will bring great, great blessing to the whole world—perhaps it will usher in the Second Coming of the Son of Man!

¹⁶ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷ Ibid., 90.

¹⁸ Ibid., 91.

3. Read the following verses: Genesis 3:1; 2 Corinthians 11:3; Revelation 12:9 and 20:2.
 - a. Who do you think is ultimately the enemy of the Jews?
 - b. Why do you think Satan has targeted the Jews since the very beginning (Romans 9:5)?
 - c. Do you think God is finished with the Jews, His chosen people? Why or why not?

DAY 3 Read Romans 11:7-10

4. Paul writes in verse 7, “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did.”
 - a. Explain how the Jews earnestly sought a righteous standing before God.
 - b. Do many church members in America today do the same thing? Explain your answer.
 - c. Read Genesis 15:6; Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-25; 4:13; and 10:1-4.
 1. Explain how the “elect” obtain righteousness.
 2. Define imputed righteousness (Use Webster if necessary).
 3. Once God has declared you righteous, can you do anything to lose your righteous standing before Him? Explain your answer.

5. Why do you think God gave many of the Jews “a spirit of stupor [a dulled mind] and eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear” (verse 8)?
 - a. Does this mean God is unjust? (Matthew 13:11-17; Romans 1:18-20; 9:14-18)

6. Paul writes in verse 9, “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.’”
 - a. [Challenge Question] Assuming that “their table” refers to all of the religious ceremonies and traditions established by Israel’s patriarchs and handed down from one generation to the next, to whom did “their table” become a snare and a trap?

 - b. How does religion (aka “churchianity”) in America also serve as a snare and a trap for many, many people?

Keller writes,

Thus in verses 9-10 (quoting from Psalm 69), we see that the “darken[ing]”S of their eyes is a “retribution.” A retribution is a punishment that exactly fits the crime. Hardening is thus a fitting punishment for a proud spirit. Pride and self-centeredness lead to hardness and lovelessness. Rejection of God leads to rejection from God. Though God executes it, it is a natural consequence.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

DAYS 4 and 5 Read Romans 11:11-16

7. [Challenge Question] Read Luke 24:27; Ephesians 1:9-10; 1 Peter 1:20; and Revelation 7:9-10. Chapter 11 of Romans is considered to be one of the most difficult chapters in the Bible. In light of that fact, try to explain God's redemptive plan for the world by incorporating your knowledge of Scripture. [Hint: Consider what God has done with the Jews throughout history! His plan began with the Jews, and it will come back to the Jews.]

Creation

Abraham

Moses

David

The Prophets

Jesus

Paul

Gentiles

Future for Israel

Heaven

8. Verses 12 and 15 state, "But if their [Israel's] transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring...For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" Explain what you think this means in relation to the above question.
9. What should we be doing for Israel and all of the Jews around the world (Psalm 122)?