



When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

"Israel Interrupted"

Romans 11:1-10

We like to keep three groups of people distinct as we read the Bible: the nation of Israel, the Gentiles, and the church. God has a plan for each of them - for each of us.

God's plan for the nation of Israel was interrupted when her leaders officially rejected Jesus Christ's rule over them and His offer of the kingdom on earth. A new group was born - the church - comprised of ethnic Jews and Gentiles who were being saved in response to the preaching of the Gospel.

One day the Lord will return for His church. He will resurrect the dead in Christ and rapture the living believers. He will take His church to the homes He has been preparing for us in Heaven.

Once the church is removed, the interruption in the Lord's dealings with His people, Israel, will be ended. He will deal with them for seven years in a time we most often call the Great Tribulation but which is also called the time of Jacob's trouble since it is definitely a time in which God is working to bring the nation of Israel back to Himself.

At the end of those seven years the Lord will return to the earth, be recognized and received by the remnant of the Jews, and finally rule over them and the whole earth from Jerusalem as the capital of the kingdom of God.

Without the completed New Testament, the future I just outlined wasn't so clear. To the first century observer it looked as though God had cast away His own people. In fact, it looked that way for some nineteen centuries!

Paul took up that issue. God has **not** “cast away His people,” meaning Israel. In verses one and two Paul presents arguments to show God has not “cast away His people.” His first argument is his own understanding of his heritage.

Romans 11:1 I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

Even though born-again as a Christian; even though he took the Gospel to the Gentiles; even though he laid the foundation for the church (along with the other apostles); Paul identified himself as a descendant of Abraham, an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin. He was not just proclaiming his earthly heritage; he was claiming his eternal inheritance! God made unconditional, national promises to Abraham's literal descendants. He made certain unique promises to the tribe of Benjamin. Paul understood that those promises were still his to one day inherit.

He wasn't simply pointing out that Jews could still be saved. He was saying that Israel continued and would continue to exist in God's plan.

That conclusion is reinforced by what Paul said next.

Romans 11:2 God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, Romans 11:3 "LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"?

Romans 11:4 But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

Elijah prayed **against** Israel because of her apostasy and sin. They had killed God's prophets and torn down God's altars. Elijah - a Jew - wanted God to cast away the nation!

Nevertheless God did not cast them away as a nation. He preserved a “remnant” of believers. There were spiritual descendants of Abraham among his apostasizing physical descendants and God was preserving them to fulfill all of His unconditional promises.

By the way... There may be a hint of God's future dealings with Israel in Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. The accounts in the Book of Acts of Paul's conversion tell very little that resembles the 'normal' salvation experience. Paul saw Jesus revealed in glory, was blinded by the light of His glory, and was thrown to the ground. Pastor Warren Wiersbe suggests that,

...[Paul's conversion] is a picture of how the nation of Israel will be saved when Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom on earth... The details of Israel's future restoration and salvation... given in Zechariah 12:10 - 13:1... will be an experience similar to that of [Paul] when he was on his way to Damascus...

Paul understood that God will preserve Israel through the church age and pick-up His dealings with them after the church removed.

Romans 11:5 Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

Paul could have said, right here, that there is no such thing as a nation of Israel that we should expect God to preserve. He could have said Israel is now the church or something similar. Instead he said that "at this present time," meaning *during this entire age*, "there is a remnant." In every generation of the church there is a "remnant" of saved Jews.

What does that mean, exactly? Well, it means that even though it's the church age, and even though Jews must be saved exactly the same way Gentiles are saved, and even though there is no requirement to convert to Judaism and/or keep the Law of Moses, **God still recognizes Jews as a distinct ethnic group.** They are still His people in a special way.

Romans 11:6 And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

This is nothing new. We've established that righteousness is of faith and not of works. Why say it like this, right here?

It's to establish that although God has a remnant of Jews throughout the church age, *they are not to split-off from the church and think they must*

keep the law! God is not through with Israel but, for now, a saved Jew is a member of the church.

Romans 11:7 What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded.

The majority of the nation of Israel was seeking the righteousness of works and had not obtained it. The “elect” within the nation of Israel are those individual Jews who have obtained righteousness by grace through faith in Jesus.

The majority, having rejected the Lord, were “blinded.” It doesn’t mean that they could not have believed; it means they would not believe and, therefore, God gave them over to their decision.

Think, for example, of Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem. He said that He wanted to gather them to Himself but they “would not” have any part of it. It was their decision, their response, and, therefore, their responsibility.

If the Jews could not believe because God had blinded them, then Jesus’ lament would have been insincere at best.

Romans 11:8 Just as it is written: "God has given them a spirit of stupor, Eyes that they should not see And ears that they should not hear, To this very day."

Romans 11:9 And David says: "Let their table become a snare and a trap, A stumbling block and a recompense to them.

Romans 11:10 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always."

These verses describe God's discipline upon the nation of Israel for their decision to reject Jesus Christ. Verse eight tells you not to expect national repentance in our day and age. Verse nine is interesting. "Table" is a reference to the Temple worship and sacrifices. Their Temple worship and sacrifices both became, and will become, the things described:

- Their Temple worship and sacrifices did become a "snare and a trap" in the sense that they preferred the outward form of worship to the personal worship of Jesus Christ.

- Their Temple worship and sacrifices will become "a stumbling block and a recompense to them" in the future Great Tribulation. In their zeal to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem, the nation of Israel will enter into a peace treaty with a world leader from Europe. He will be none other than the Antichrist. He will enter their Temple, defile it by declaring that he is God, then brutally persecute them.

We encountered a couple of terms that believers spar over: "foreknew" and "elect." Let's take a quick look at them, starting with "election."

The word "election" itself is derived from the Greek word, *eklegomai*, which means, literally, "to choose something for oneself." When used of persons the "elect" are those who are saved.

Exactly how is election accomplished? That's the \$64,000.00 question. One popular theological opinion is called unconditional election. It is the belief that God sovereignly, on the basis of His grace, chose before time certain individuals on whom He would bestow His saving grace. God chose some in eternity past to save and, when these who are His elect hear the Gospel, they are regenerated and then are enabled to exercise faith and repentance. With unconditional election, the believing sinner exercises no free will, has no real choice. God has determined his or her salvation from eternity past. All who were elected in eternity past will be unavoidably saved.

You know the expression, "the 800 pound gorilla in the room"? Unconditional election brings an 800 pound gorilla into the discussion of election. Simply stated, God could have saved everyone but determined to only save a very few. And those He determined to not save, well, He determined to damn them to Hell.

It's called by theologians "double predestination." If God predestined some to election and salvation, then He also predestined others to reprobation and damnation.

Although some who believe in unconditional election try to distance themselves from this awful conclusion, it is the inevitable result of their view of election as being unconditional, and many, if not most, of those who believe election is unconditional will readily admit predestination is double in this sense.

Those who argue against unconditional election don't do so because it robs you of free will. They oppose it on biblical grounds because it robs God of certain of His attributes, i.e., love and justice.

Simply put, if God selects some to be saved unconditionally and irresistibly, why doesn't He choose all?

Commenting on unconditional election and its inevitable double predestination, one scholar said, "God is thereby rendered morally ambiguous at best and a moral monster at worst."

Another scholar said, "I believe this so-called double predestination of individuals by God is inconsistent with his love, and the teaching makes it difficult to tell the difference between God and the devil."

Here is another even stronger criticism: "Only a moral monster would refuse to save persons when salvation is absolutely unconditional and solely an act of God that does not depend on [man's] free will."

Is there an alternative to unconditional election? Yes. It involves our understanding of the second controversial word, "foreknew," meaning God's "foreknowledge."

The great evangelist John Wesley summarized God's foreknowledge when he said,

God sees from all eternity who will and will not accept His atoning work. God does not coerce the acceptance of His offer. The Atonement is available for all, but not received by all.

This view of foreknowledge led theologian Henry Thiessen, in his classic work, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, to write,

Election is that sovereign act of God in grace, whereby from all eternity He chose in Christ Jesus for Himself and for salvation, all those whom He foreknew would respond positively to prevenient grace...”

This type of election, based on God’s knowing beforehand who would receive and who would reject the sincere offer of salvation, is sometimes called “conditional election.” It is conditioned upon the response of the sinner’s freed will.

How can a dead sinner have a freed will to respond to God? You might have noticed in the last quote, by Thiessen, the term “prevenient grace.” What’s that???

Roger Olson defines it this way:

Prevenient grace is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible. [Those who hold to unconditional election] interpret it as *irresistible* and effectual; the person in whom it works [must] repent and believe unto salvation. [Those who believe election is conditional] interpret it as *resistible*; people are always able to resist the grace of God, as Scripture warns (Acts 7:51).

In conditional election, prevenient grace frees the human will to respond to the Gospel in repentance and faith. No one is forced or coerced to believe; but no one is passed-over because they cannot believe by God’s choice in eternity past.

Conditional election is not without its own issues. For example it’s hard to reconcile God’s absolute foreknowledge with man’s freed will.

I wouldn’t say it’s an 800 pound gorilla in the room, however. *It’s more like a chimpanzee!* In the end I would rather live with the problem of how God remains sovereign while freeing our will than come to the conclusion that God has predestined most of His creatures, **whom He could have saved but determined to not save**, to an eternity in Hell.

God is sovereign. God is also love. The question becomes, Does God in His sovereignty limit His love so that “love” seems more like indifference or hatred in His predestinating people to Hell?

Or does God in His love choose to limit His sovereignty so that He remains in control of His universe, working out all things to His glory, while simultaneously giving whosoever will believe the prevenient grace to exercise what amounts to a freed will?

I choose the chimp over the gorilla!!

(If you are interested in digging deeper you might enjoy the book,
Against Calvinism, by Roger E. Olson)