



Group Discussion Guide

Romans 11:1-16

For groups meeting May 24 evening through May 31 morning.

Paul's indictment of Israel in Romans 10:18-21 led him to ask the question, "has God rejected his people?" (Romans 11:1). His customary answer follows, "By no means!" (v. 1). As with other questions Paul answered in Romans, it seemed this was something he knew his readers would ask in light of truth that he shared at the end of the previous chapter. (We must keep in mind that Paul is writing about a group of people – an entire nation, in fact – and so his statements apply in a general way and are not meant to apply to every individual who is part of that group. This is always the case when he refers to "Israel," "the Jews" or "Gentiles.")

As he did in Romans 8:29, Paul pointed to God's foreknowledge in relation to "his people," the nation of Israel (v. 2). God knew there would always be some among the people who would remain faithful to him. Paul used the example of God's prophet Elijah to illustrate this point (vs. 2-4). In 1 Kings 19, Elijah faced threats from King Ahab's wife Jezebel, who was angry that Elijah had defeated and then killed the prophets of the false god Baal. Ahab and Jezebel led the northern kingdom of Israel during Elijah's day and their actions were consistently in rebellion against God. Elijah expressed to God that he felt very alone as a servant of God and that he was ready to die (1 Kings 19:4,10). God responded by leading Elijah to Mount Horeb, the "mountain of God," also known as Mount Sinai. This is the same general area where God spoke to Moses through the burning bush, and where God gave Moses the law. It was here that Elijah heard God's voice through a whisper, after God had sent a powerful wind, an earthquake and even a firestorm (1 Kings 19:11-13). God directed Elijah to anoint new kings of Syria and Israel, and to anoint Elisha to take his place as a prophet. And then he gave Elijah a powerful message in Kings 19:18, which Paul quotes in Romans 11:4, "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

Paul applied this message from God to his time and stated there were those of the nation of Israel who had come to faith in Christ and experienced God's grace (vs. 5-6). This "remnant" was proof that God was not finished with His chosen people of Israel. However, Paul continued to remind his readers how most of the nation had in fact rejected Christ. While those whom God foreknew ("the elect") did find what Israel as a nation had sought through the law, "the rest were hardened," (v. 7). Paul used Isaiah 29:10 to show how God, based on His foreknowledge (v. 2), had chosen to prevent them from seeing the truth and therefore from experiencing the blessing of salvation through faith in Christ. This passage from Isaiah is a message to the people of Jerusalem, and Isaiah 29:10 specifically is given to the prophets of that time. While God had chosen to rescue Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrians, her prophets would not be able to foresee this potential judgment or the coming deliverance of God because they had chosen to ignore His ways and His voice.

Another aspect of Israel's rejection of God's plan of redemption was how they allowed their blessings to cause them to stumble. Paul used a quote from David in Psalm 69:22-23 to illustrate this (vs. 9-10). While David was writing about his own enemies, Paul used his words to show how Israel's focus on what God had provided for them at the time prevented them from seeing what He was preparing for their future. They were so satisfied with their position as Abraham's descendants and recipients of the covenants and the law, that they refused to look for the promised Messiah as God had described him through prophecy. Instead, they insisted on believing the Messiah would bring them back to power as an earthly kingdom. Those who chose to reject Jesus would not see the truth of salvation by faith in him, and they would be enslaved to sin forever.

In verses 11-16, Paul focused on how the Gospel's impact on Jews and Gentiles affected each group and how this plays into the larger plan of God (this theme is continued in verses 17-36, which we will be reading next week). Paul indicated that Israel's "stumbling" was not a "fall," meaning that the nation's rejection of Jesus Christ was not the end of God's plan for His people (v. 11). The nation's rejection of the Gospel led to the message of salvation being taken to the Gentiles. This, in turn, would make Israel jealous so that one day the nation would accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote that since Israel's rejection of the Gospel led to a blessing for the rest of the world, their acceptance of the Gospel just before the return of Jesus would lead to the resurrection of the dead (v. 15). He then used two examples to illustrate that God would continue to work through Israel. The first portion of dough and the root are references to the Old Testament patriarchs who followed God in faith, and the "whole lump" and branches are references to the majority of the nation who will come to faith and usher in the next phase of God's plan: the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead (v. 16). (It should be noted that the first portion of dough could also be a reference to Jews who had come to faith in Christ; though this interpretation does not change the larger meaning of Paul's parable.).

Discussion Questions

1. Paul's words about Israel in Romans 10:18-21 might lead someone to think that perhaps God was done with the nation He had chosen to be set apart for Him. What are some people groups in today's world that we who believe might be tempted to see as being "beyond hope"? What are some passages in Scripture that can help us to remember that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace?
2. Can you identify with Elijah's sense of exhaustion and loneliness in 1 Kings 19:4,10? How did God encourage him? What prevents us from being encouraged by God when we feel this way?
3. What does it mean to you to know that God has kept for himself a "remnant" of people who are faithful to Him?
4. Why at times do we live as those in Jerusalem (referenced in Isaiah 29:10) who could not see the potential judgment and promised salvation of God in our lives?
5. Paul wrote that the people of Israel allowed their blessings to cause them to stumble. Do you see a similar pattern in your own life? If so, how does this play out? What would it take to regain the proper perspective?
6. How will Israel's general acceptance of the Gospel be a blessing to the whole world?