

God's Purposes Do Not Fail

Romans 11:1-6

Today is the first day of a new year. 2016 is history. Some of us might be thinking, "Thank God." This last year certainly had its share of trouble. Reflecting back on 2016 you may have felt at times that the world was out of control and that the bad guys are winning. You see the horrors of terrorism, war, and natural disasters that wipe out thousands. You hear about terrible crimes toward little children. You read about corruption in government both here and abroad. You hear about Christians being persecuted and killed in many countries. The list goes on and on. Sometimes it can be depressing to the point that you wonder whether God is really in charge of world events. We have a tendency to lose a biblical and faithful perspective.

This is one of the reasons why we need Romans 11. This chapter is about the big picture, it's about the plan of God. Sometimes when we are down in the problems of life we lose the big picture in the details. We not only lose perspective because of world events, but also because of personal struggles.

Some of us are struggling in our marriages, we're wrestling as parents, we're having a hard time at work, or at school, and the details are overwhelming to us. We feel as if we're never going to come back up for air. Romans 11 calls us to pull back for a moment and realize that we are part of a much bigger plan, a plan that's far bigger than our own problems and even the contemporary problems of this world. Romans 11 calls us to pull back for a moment and realize this is not all about us, it's about God's plan, it's about His glory, that is not only practical, it's essential, without it we cease to truly live.

What we find when we go to the Bible is that there is a purposeful history in it. It moves from predestination, to creation, to the call of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to the bondage of Israel in Egypt, to the Exodus and the giving of the law and the wilderness wandering, to the promised land and the judges and the kingdom with Saul and David and Solomon, and to the divided nations of Judah and Israel, to the exile of Assyrian and Babylon and the return to the homeland, to the silence between the Old and New Testaments, to the coming of the Messiah - Jesus Christ - and the rejection of Christ by His people, to His crucifixion and resurrection and ascension, to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and on to the amazing spread of the gospel of Christ among more and more of the peoples of the world, including us.

We are a part of that history, and God is not finished yet. Romans 11 reminds us that God is not done working in this world. He is not finished with the people of Israel. God has a plan and a purpose in all of what has happened, all that is happening today, and all that will happen in the future.

Romans 11. It is all about the way God has acted and will act toward Israel and toward the nations in history. And therefore it is all about who God is and what He is like. This is why history matters. This is why there is history. History exists to reveal God. It's all about him, from beginning to end.

Psalms 19:1 says **"The heavens declare the glory of God"** (Psalm 19:1).

In Jeremiah the Lord says that the people of Israel exist for His glory. **"I have caused the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to cling to Me," says the Lord, 'that they may become My people, for renown, for praise, and for glory.'** (Jeremiah 13:11).

Jesus says He came into the world to die to glorify God. In John 12, speaking about His coming death and resurrection Jesus says, **"Now My soul is troubled, and what shall**

I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name ..." (John 12:27-28).

Paul writes in Ephesians 3 that the Church of Jesus Christ exists for the display of the glory of the Father. "**Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.**" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Even secular rulers and institutions exist for God's purpose (Romans 13:1, **For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.**) Back in Romans 9:17 we learned, **For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."** (Romans 9:17).

Romans 11 ends with the doxology, **"For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen."**

Everything, all of history - including what is happening all around us - is a canvas being painted by an infinitely glorious and highly skilled Artist. And the point of the painting is His glory - including all the pain and all the horror and all the injustice of this world which serve as a backdrop for God's holy wrath and gracious mercy.

What is God like? That is the point of history. The most important events for understanding God in history have already happened. Jesus Christ is the center of the story. He's the most important character and He is what the plot is all about. The Bible is the record of this history with Jesus at the center, and that is why the Bible guides how we interpret every event that happens in our world.

Romans 11 gives us a glimpse of God's plan and purpose in history. Just as we saw in Romans 9 and 10, it's not easy for us to comprehend all of what God is doing and why He does it. Maybe that is why Paul concludes this chapter by declaring, "**Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!**"

Summary of Romans 11

Just to give you a flavor of where Paul is going and how strange God's rule over history is, look at verses 30-32. This is the last thing he says before he sings his doxology at the end of the chapter. He is summing up God's ways with the Gentiles and the Jews in history.

Romans 11:30-32 - 30 For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, 31 even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. 32 For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.

Paul here gives us four broad categories of history:

- 1) The Gentiles were disobedient to God. There was a long history of letting the nations go their own way while God focused his redemptive work on Israel.
- 2) Then there was the disobedience of Israel as she rejected her Messiah and stumbled over the stumbling stone (Romans 9:32-33).
- 3) This disobedience led to mercy for the Gentiles as the gospel spread among the nations. And notice in verse 31 that this is not mere sequence. This is divine plan: They - Israel - have now been disobedient *in order that* by the mercy shown to you - Gentiles - they also may now receive mercy. Which is the fourth step:

4) Israel receives mercy because the mercy shown to the Gentiles. God aimed to show mercy to both. Therefore (v. 32) he consigned both Jews and Gentiles to disobedience that He may have mercy on both groups.

In broad brushstrokes that is what God is doing throughout history. So with that introduction, let's look at Romans 11:1-6:

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.

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,

3 "Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? , Kings 19:14

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."

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

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 passage first speaks of something God does *not* do - He does not cast away His people. Verse 1: **"I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not!"**

Then it speaks of something God *did* do - He foreknew them. Verse 2: **" God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew."**

Then it speaks of something God did in the past and something He still does - He kept for Himself a remnant of faithful people. He did it in Elijah's day and Paul's day, and He still does today. Verse 4: **" I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."** And Verse 5: **" Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant."**

And finally it tells us (at the end of verse 5) how God did it **"according to the election of grace."** God chose them by grace.

1. God Has Not Rejected His People

Paul's first argument in verse 1 that God has not rejected his people is that he himself is a Jew. **" 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."** The people Paul is concerned about in verse 1 are the same people He anguished over in Romans 9, where he wrote, **"I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites."** (Romans 9:2-4). God's people here are the physical, ethnic people of Israel. Proof that God has not rejected ethnic Israel is Paul himself, **"For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin."** Down in verse 26 Paul says, **"And so all Israel will be saved."**

Does that mean that all Jewish people who ever lived will be saved? The answer has to be no. Jesus said, **And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. 12 But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,"** (Matthew 8:11-12).

And Paul had written earlier in Romans 2:8-9, "**but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness--indignation and wrath, 9 tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.**" So when Paul says that God has not cast away the Israelites, he does not mean that every individual Jewish person will automatically be saved because he is a Jew. As we learned in chapter 9, "**those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed,**" (Romans 9:8). That principle has not changed. No Jew or Gentile individual is saved because of his ethnicity or background.

Well then what does Paul mean when he says in verse 2, "**God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew,**"?

Some argue that Paul simply means the "**remnant**" mentioned in verse 5: "**Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.**" In other words, Paul and other Jews in his day are believers in the Messiah, and so there is a faithful remnant who will inherit the promises made to Israel, and so God has not rejected His people, namely, His remnant whom He foreknew.

That's part of the answer. But there's a problem with it: that's not what verse 1 was asking when it said, "**has God cast away His people?**" The problem verse 1 is raising is not that there is no remnant. Paul has already indicated in chapters 9 and 10 that there was a remnant of Jews who were saved (9:24, 27).

Remember that the problem in these chapters is that it looks like Israel taken as a whole, is mainly perishing and cut off from Christ. That's the issue raised in verse 1. That's what I think Paul refers to when he says God has not cast away His people - the people of Israel taken as a corporate whole in any given generation. God has not rejected them. Paul will give several arguments for this in chapter 11 (Romans 11:15, 16, 24, 25, 28f, 31).

Here Paul gives himself as a testimony to God's faithfulness. Paul could say "No, God has not rejected the Jews. For I myself am a Jew, and I am not rejected. I have been accepted not first because of the Jewish forefathers, but because of Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me. My sins are forgiven. His righteousness is provided for me. My condemnation is removed. My guilt is taken away. I have been born again into the family of God, not by natural birth or any ethnic connection, but by the Holy Spirit who changed my heart and awakened faith. I am not an enemy of God, but a friend. I am not hardened and resistant anymore, but broken and dependent. No, God has not rejected the Jews. Because in Christ he has not rejected me."

2. God Has Foreknown His People

One reason Paul gives here in our passage is God's foreknowledge. Paul says in Verse 2, "**God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.**" He means that if God foreknew them, then He can't reject them. The foreknowing implies a commitment to them. It can't be broken. That's why Paul is sure God has not rejected Israel as a whole. He foreknew them.

So what does this foreknowing mean? The clearest illustration of it in relation to the whole people of Israel is found Amos 3:2. God says to Israel, "**You only have I known of all the families of the earth.**" Almost everyone agrees that this means, "You only have I chosen. You only have I sought out and made mine and known you the way a husband knows a wife." This is what Paul means by God's foreknowledge in Romans 11:2. Israel is God's foreknown, that is, chosen people.

Look down further in the chapter to Romans 11:28-29. There Paul writes, "**Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are**

beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."

This cannot be just a reference to the remnant. The believing remnant are not "enemies of God" for the sake of Gentiles. They are not part of the disobedience that leads to mercy for the Gentiles (11:31-32). This is referring to the visible corporate nation of people called Jews. And because most of them reject Christ, they are presently enemies of God, and cut off from Christ (Romans 9:3). But that is not the whole story. There is a future for corporate Israel, because they are as a corporate people "elect." That is, they are "foreknown." God made a covenant with their forefathers. "You only have I known from all the peoples of the earth."

And in Paul's mind the fact that there is a remnant of Jewish believers in the Messiah that God has kept for Himself (vv. 4-5) is proof that God is not through with corporate Israel.

3. God Has Chosen His People by Grace

Verses 2-6 provide us with an Old Testament illustration God's grace in election. Paul turns to an incident in the ministry of Elijah to illustrate his point.

2 ... Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying,

3 "Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? , Kings 19:14

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 was a prophet to the nation Israel. Due to the sin of this people, God's judgment was pronounced upon the nation just as Moses had warned in Deuteronomy 28-31. Specifically, Elijah's ministry began with the announcement that there would be no more rain in the land until he gave the word (see 1 Kings 17:1). Elijah was then sent into hiding until the time when God would send the rains (17:2-24). After considerable time passed, God commanded Elijah to present himself to king Ahab and to announce that the rains were coming (18:1-15).

When Elijah stood before Ahab, he challenged the false gods of Ahab and Jezebel, his wicked wife, to a contest on Mt. Carmel. In this contest, the false gods were exposed when God revealed His power by sending fire from heaven and consuming the watered-down sacrifice offered by Elijah (18:19-40). In spite of these events on Mt. Carmel, Israel did not repent as a nation, and Ahab and Jezebel remained in power. Worse yet, Jezebel vowed to put Elijah to death (19:2). When Elijah saw that his ministry had proven to be a failure, he turned and fled.

Elijah was wrong. Paul focuses on one aspect of Elijah's error and how God corrected it. Elijah is said to have pled with God **against** Israel and not **for** Israel (verse 2). Why did he not plead with God for Israel? Because Elijah had given up hope for Israel. The question Paul has raised in verse 1 ("**God has not rejected His people, has He?**") is not an idle one. Elijah, in his moment of despair, thought that it was all over for Israel. He ran away because he believed God had, or should have, given up on this rebellious people. After all, he had just dramatically demonstrated the sin of their idolatry. He had presented to them the God whom they must trust and obey. But in spite of his ministry, which proved they were guilty and without excuse, they did not repent and turn to God.

From the words which Paul cites in verse 3, we can see why Elijah gave up hope. His focus was all wrong, "**Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.**"

Elijah's focus is on Israel and on himself, but not on God. Because he has fixed his eyes on man rather than on God, Elijah can only see failure. He, as a prophet, has failed (see 1 Kings 19:4). Israel too had failed. Since all Israel had rejected him and since he alone was left as a prophet, in his thinking at least there was no hope for Israel. In Elijah's mind, man's failure, both his and Israel's, had nullified the purposes and promises of God. Israel's hope was gone. Elijah wrongly concluded, because man had failed God.

God's answer corrected this error, and His subsequent actions proved that Israel's hope rests not in the faithfulness of men but in the faithfulness of God:

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." (Romans 11:4).

Notice that while Elijah's words are man-centered, God's response is God-centered. It mattered not that Elijah had failed or even that most of the nation Israel had failed. God was in control. Though most of the nation had failed, including Elijah, God would not allow man's failure to hinder His purposes and promises for Israel, the people whom He had foreknown. Because of this, God preserved for Himself a remnant of 7,000 people. It was through this remnant that God's purposes would be carried out.

Elijah was a prophet, but he was not infallible. He was wrong about Israel's future. He was wrong because he linked the hope of Israel to the works of Israelites rather than to the grace of God. God always finishes what He starts. Because of this, God preserved a remnant. It was not man's faithfulness which kept the hope of Israel alive, but God's faithfulness.

The principles by which God has dealt with Israel in the past hold true to the present. Thus Paul can and does extend the principle he has just established to Israel's present condition.

The principle is this: **God will finish what He starts, on the basis of His grace, achieved through a remnant of those whom He chooses and preserves.**

Those who might lose hope for Israel in Paul's day needed only to be reminded that there was a remnant of "true Israelites" in their own day, just as there had always been down through Israel's history. This remnant was the assurance that God's purposes for this people would be fulfilled sometime in the future. Numbered among this remnant was none other than Paul himself (see verse 1). This remnant was a remnant **"according to God's gracious choice,"** that is, a remnant in accordance with the principle and working of grace.

We must contemplate the implications of this remnant according to grace. Paul plays out the implications in verse 6. Since it was a remnant according to grace, Israel's future was not dependent upon good works but upon God, whose purposes and promises are based on grace. Because the future of Israel is based upon God's grace, it cannot be earned by man's good works, and neither can it be lost by human failure.

The failure of Israel could not nullify the sovereign purpose of God to bless His people, Israel. While Israel's hope is a future hope, it is a certain hope based upon the principle of grace and upon the character and power of God.

Conclusion

Can God's promises fail? If they're based on anything in fallen humanity, then they easily could fail. But if they're based on His sovereign, gracious choice, then God's promises are rock solid.

Adoniram Judson, who spent his life taking the gospel to Burma, once said in the midst of his many trials, "The future is as bright as the promises of God" (cited in *Christian*

History & Biography [Spring, 2006], pp. 6, 40). He didn't live to see much visible fruit for his years of hardship. But today, with only 49 million people, Burma has over a million Baptists. Judson, who believed in God's sovereign grace, knew that His promises could not fail. So no matter what your trials, if you have received God's grace in Christ, you have a bright future because His promises cannot fail.