

The Believing and the Blinded

Romans 11:7-10

John 9:39 says, **And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind."**

Jesus always divides people into one of two camps: Those who believe in Him for salvation receive eternal life; those who reject Him are made blind in unbelief and face eventual eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46). There is no third category. So, be very careful how you respond to Jesus!

Paul gives the same two categories in Romans 11.

Two possibilities:

1. Those who obtain righteousness by God's grace.
2. Those who are hardened in their unbelief.

Which category are you in today?

We're not jumping into a new subject. We're still working through Paul's explanation of divine election, human responsibility, and how both are applied to Israel particularly, and extended to the entire world. In Romans chapters 9-11 Paul is dealing with the question of why most Jews were rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Romans 9 focused on Israel's past and God's electing purposes. There we saw that not everyone in Israel was chosen by God for salvation. So not all Israel is the true, believing Israel. Romans 10 focused on Israel's present. The Jews are truly guilty before God because though the gospel was preached to them, they turned away from it. This is put in capsule form in the very last verse of the chapter: "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." Romans 11 then deals with Israel's future. Paul shows that God is not finished with Israel and that all this has happened according to God's plan and purposes of grace.

Twice in this passage the Apostle Paul asks the question "Did God reject His people?" (Rom. 11:1, 11). He is asking: Is God through with Israel because of their rejection of Jesus Christ and the salvation he provides? Because they turned a deaf ear to that, has God wiped them out? Has he said they no longer have any place in his scheme of things?

Twice Paul raises that question here, and twice he answers it the same way: "**Certainly not!**"

Did the unbelief of the Jews cause God's promises to fail? Did their rejection of Christ mean that God was now through with the Jews forever? No, Paul says. Last time we saw that the existence of a remnant of saved Jews shows that God was not done with the nation. So their rejection is partial, not total (11:1-10). Paul will go on to prove that their rejection is temporary, not permanent (11:11-24) and that their rejection serves God's purposes (11:25-32). The unbelief of the Jews (or any other person) cannot spoil God's purpose, which depends on His grace, not on what people do. As we saw in verses 5-6 the believing remnant is according to God's gracious choice (11:5-6), and does not depend at all on works.

So in verse 7 Paul asks, "**What then?**" In other words, how does he summarize up to this point his exposition of God's mercy, grace, sovereign justice and how it relates to the Jewish people? How does he weigh the fact that from the people of Israel there is only a remnant of true believers? What about the rest who are not part of the remnant elected by grace? That's Paul's concern in these verses.

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

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."

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

10 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, And bow down their back always."

A. Israel sought righteousness by works and did not obtain it.

Romans 11:7: **"What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks"** What Israel was seeking, but did not obtain, was right standing with God, or righteousness. Romans 9:30-32 says:

(Romans 9:30-32 NKJV) **30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; 31 but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. 32 Why? Because [they did] not [seek it] by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.**

In chapter 10 he also adds with reference to the Jews, (Romans 10:2-4 NKJV) **2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. 4 For Christ [is] the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**

For the most part, the Jews did not lack sincerity. The Pharisees and Sadducees were hypocrites (Matt. 23:13-33), but the majority of the Jews were sincere in their dedication to their religion. Nor did they lack commitment. They followed the prescribed rituals and laws with dedication that would put most of us to shame. Nor did they lack zeal. Look at Paul's zeal before he was saved. He went to great lengths to try to keep the Jewish religion pure by eliminating those whom he saw as heretics. But if your religious sincerity, commitment, and zeal are misguided, they will only move you toward judgment with greater speed.

The problem, Paul explained, was that their zeal was not according to knowledge, namely, the knowledge that their own good works could never be good enough to atone for their sins or to commend them to the holy God. And they did not know that Christ was the final and sufficient Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for their sins. And they didn't know that God's way of salvation is by grace through faith, not by works. And so they did not obtain the right standing with God that they were seeking.

B. Those who obtain righteousness are chosen by grace.

The rest of verse 7 says, **"but the elect have obtained it."** Paul could have said, "Those who believe obtained it," which would be true. But the word Paul used emphasizes the one who 'elects' rather than any choice made by the people and so all the glory is to be given to God alone.

Paul does not explain his statement in verse 7 or see any need to defend it (except for the Scripture quotations that follow). He just says in passing, "What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened." It reminds me of Acts 13, where Luke reports that some of the Jews responded to Paul's preaching by blaspheming and attacking him (13:45), but many Gentiles (13:48)

“began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord.” Then Luke adds in the narrative, **“And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”**

C. The rest are hardened.

Paul ends verse 7 by saying, **“and the rest were blinded.”** The word blinded literally means hardened, to cover with a thick skin, to harden by covering with a callus.

Hardened is a passive verb. Who hardened them? Verse 8 plainly tells us, **“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.”**” That quote combines Isaiah 29:10 and Deuteronomy 29:4. It also reflects Isaiah 6:10, where God is speaking to the prophet and tells him, **“Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed.”** That Old Testament scripture is so important that Jesus quotes it in Matthew 13:14-15 (and the parallels, Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10) and in John 12:40; and Paul also cites it to the resistant Jews in Acts 28:26-27.

It refers to God’s hardening of the Jews, who had heard so much truth and seen so many demonstrations of God’s love and power, but refused to submit to Him. In Deuteronomy 29:2-4, Moses said to all Israel after 40 years in the wilderness,

“You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land-- 3 the great trials which your eyes have seen, the signs, and those great wonders. 4 Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day.”

So even as far back as Moses, Israel had come under this blinding, this hardening, as seen in their continual grumbling against God and refusal to submit to Him. Later, they followed the idolatry and evil ways of the Canaanites, until finally God sent them into captivity. But even after being restored to the land, they continued to try to approach God by their works, so that they hated the Savior who came and convicted them of their self-righteousness and pride. And so in Paul’s day, the nation that had crucified the Savior came under even increased hardening from God that has lasted now for 2,000 years! The frightening words of the Jewish mob that was screaming for Jesus’ death have come true (Matt. 27:25), **“His blood shall be on us and on our children!”**

How are we to understand this blinding and hardening?

From God’s perspective, He is free to act according to His own counsel for His own glory and is not obligated to any creature. As we saw in Romans 9:18, **“So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”** God is not constrained by anything outside of Himself. If He chose to condemn the entire human race without providing a Savior, He would be free and perfectly just to do so.

But also, God’s hardening of the Jews was punishment for their sins. Look at what Paul quotes from Psalm 69:23. It’s in verse 9, **“And David says: “Let their table become a snare and a trap, A stumbling block and a recompense to them.”** God did it as **“recompense”** to them (11:9) because of their disobedient, hard hearts (10:21) and **“unbelief”** (11:20). Paul describes the non-remnant like this: **“ Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith.”** Here he stresses human responsibility.

Israel had been given much light (9:4-5), but they stubbornly refused to respond to it. So God said in effect, **“If you refuse to see, I’ll confirm that choice: Be blind. If you refuse to**

hear, be deaf!” How terrifying, to have God pronounce such judgments against you! There is a scary principle in the Bible: If you reject the light that God graciously gives you, He will confirm your rejection and leave you in your blindness.

A table should be a place of nourishment and blessing, but David prays that it will become a snare for his enemies. God gives many blessings, even to unbelievers: material possessions, food, the joys of married love, children, etc. But if they do not honor God and give thanks to Him, then their foolish hearts will be darkened and these blessings will be a curse that keeps them from the supreme joy of knowing God (Rom. 1:21-32).

God always protects and provides for his people. But if those blessings are not received by faith, then they become a stumbling block. God’s blessings always demand a response one way or the other. Either you accept them with gratitude or you reject what God has done in your life. You receive the truth of God or you resist it. Because Israel resisted God and took his blessings for granted, God said, “Since you don’t appreciate what I have done for you, I am going to harden your heart.” And that is why some people are not saved. God’s hardening always comes as a result of people responding wrongly to God’s blessings. Some people reject the gospel after hearing it over and over again. Because they continually resist the truth, God hardens their heart against it.

Be warned though. This hardening will ultimately lead to final judgment. Romans 11:10: **“Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, And bow down their back always.”** The last word may be translated always or continually (in light of 11:25-26), but it may also refer to God’s permanent judgment. “Bow down their backs” pictures a heavy burden or bondage. The Jews wanted to establish their own righteousness by works of the law, so they are consigned to that futile pursuit that can never obtain the righteousness that comes by grace through faith. As Peter said in Acts 15:10-11, **“Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”**

2 Corinthians 3:15-16 describes how many Israelites have a veil covering their hearts: **“But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. 15 But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart.”** The good news is that when an individual reaches out and calls upon Jesus, this veil is lifted: **“Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”**

Have you believed in Jesus Christ? If so, it’s because you were appointed to eternal life by God’s sovereign election. Do you not yet believe? Don’t delay! If you reject the light God has given, you may become blind to it completely.