

Romans 11:1-10 The Believing Remnant

If you came to church today you will have noticed that most people were either still in bed, or going in the other direction! I was talking to an Abbeyfield resident on Friday who was lamenting that Christianity is no longer taught properly in schools. I pointed out that in 1900 96% of children went to Sunday school; by 2000 96% children didn't go to Sunday school. If you have continued in your Christian faith, then you are one of the leftovers, what the Bible calls "the remnant." Well done!

Romans 11 is about the remnant of Israel, those among Israel who did receive Jesus as their Messiah and believed on His Name. It is about the remnant of Israel, among whom Paul included himself, within the larger unbelieving nation of Israel.

It seems to me that Paul is particularly concerned with the relationship of the remnant of believing Israel and the rest of unbelieving Israel, because he longs that they be saved. In fact Paul believes that God has promised that they will be saved from their apostasy (Romans 11:26).

This touches on the importance of the relationship of the church with Israel today, which historically has been very, very bad. But I think it also speaks to us about the importance of believing church within wider unbelieving communities (e.g. Girton); and the importance of positive relationships of believers with unbelieving family members, friends and work colleagues. This is because God is *not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance* (2Peter 3:9). Romans 11 is the theory, but in chapters 12-15 Paul will show in more detail what this means in practice.

The idea of a remnant of God's people is nothing new. In one sense the bible is the story of God calling the few to work out His purposes:

- In the ancient world God saved just 8, Noah and his family at the time of the flood;
- God called one man and his family, Abraham, out of the decaying Babel Empire;
- God whittled Gideon's army down to just 300 to face 135,000 Midianites;
- God called the exiled remnant of His people in Babylon 'good figs' (Jeremiah 24) since he had a specific purpose for them – they were the ones who a generation later would be involved in God's work of restoration.

But in Romans 11 Paul draws on another example, from Elijah. Elijah had had a show down with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and he won a great victory. But cruel queen Jezebel was not amused and determined to kill Elijah. Elijah ran for his life and then cried out to the Lord, *Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?* (Romans 11:3). When we look at the apostasy of our own nation we may feel a bit like Elijah. But what did the Lord say to Elijah? *I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal* (Romans 11:4). Elijah was not alone, and the Lord had his remnant.

1. The remnant is a matter of God's sovereign grace

Elijah wasn't even aware of the remnant; he thought he was the last man standing. This shows that the believing remnant had nothing to do with Elijah! It was a matter of God's saving grace. There was a remnant in Elijah's day who had not bowed the knee to the idols of this world, just as in Paul's day, a remnant *chosen by grace* (Romans 11:5), and *elect* (Romans 11:7). They were elect, and chosen by grace because ... they were elect and chosen by grace. And that's it!

Jesus said, *I know whom I have chosen* (John 13:18), and *You did not choose me, but I chose you* (John 15:16). As I have said before, God's choosing is not arbitrary because it is motivated by His grace, to show grace to the undeserving. We are called to be God's remnant in a time of apostasy, and we should consider this vocation. We are not called because we are clever, or wise, or influential, or good people, or godly. In fact quite the opposite (see 1Corinthians 1:26-29)! There is only one explanation for our calling, and that is God's sovereign grace.

2. The remnant is called according to God's plan

The Lord said to Elijah, *I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal* (Romans 11:4). Was it exactly 7000 men? I think it could have been 7001, or 6996! But I also think 7000 is significant because 7 in the bible is the number of completion or perfection. 7000 wasn't many compared to the size of the nation, but it was God's perfect number, because God has a plan in preserving a remnant.

Living in times of apostasy is not easy. It wasn't easy for the remnant in Elijah's day living under the tyrannical rule of Jezebel. Yet God was able, and he is able, to protect, preserve and strengthen the faith of his people who were living under the shadow of His wings.

Paul uses the little phrase *God is able (powerful/strong)* a number of times in Romans. Abraham was strong in faith because he was *fully convinced that God was able/strong to do what he had promised*. (Romans 4:21, see also Ephesians 3:20-21). Although the demise of the church in the UK is sad, we can also see it as God's pruning, and we recognise God's plan to preserve and strengthen the faithful remnant of His people, in order to use them in the work of restoration (John 15:16).

3. The remnant is a sign of hope

For Paul, the remnant saved by grace was a sign that God had not rejected Israel and that one day she would be saved. At the time of writing, Israel as a nation was hardened, and *given over* (Romans 11:7-10). This all sounds pretty final, but as Paul makes clear it is not because, *all Israel will be saved* (Romans 11:26). This also gives us encouragement for our unbelieving family, family and nation because God gave His Son for the sins of the whole world, and God is able (has strength) to change human hearts.

You see, the remnant aren't just harking back to the good old days, or just holding the fort. The remnant have a sense of call; of purpose; a sense that God wants to do a new thing. The remnant is future-orientated; looking forward and not back; trusting in the promises of God. But, the remnant are not only trusting in the promises of God, they carry the promises of God, because the remnant have been entrusted with the gospel of the coming kingdom: *repent for the kingdom of God is at hand*.

It was the remnant in Paul's day that took the gospel to the nations. It is amazing that Jesus did it by starting with only 12. How can we explain this? We explain it by recognising that it is not about numbers: *'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty* (Zechariah 4:6). The existence of a believing remnant is a sign of hope.

But the question is what kind of remnant are we going to be? Are we going to be a remnant that has the strength (the faith) to preach the gospel and to be involved in God's work of restoration? Or will we be a complacent remnant like the church of Laodicea who said, *I am rich; I have acquired wealth and I do not need a thing*, and sat back and did nothing. Can we rise to the challenge of exercising a transforming influence in our communities?