

Chapter 11

Verses 1–6 The remnant

Some people think I believed that God had definitively rejected his people, but that's not what I'm saying at all. The fact is that I'm Jewish myself – as are lots of those who follow King Jesus – so I couldn't possibly be arguing that God has rejected the whole of Israel. Obviously, God has not rejected those he foreknew which is to say, that God has not rejected Israel according to the promise. A little Bible study will help us to understand what's happening. Elijah thought that he was the last one left who was faithful to God, but it turned out that he was far from alone. In the same way, there's a remnant of Israel by descent that is still within the people of promise. But they're not there because of their outward displays of belonging but on the basis of the sheer generosity of God.

1. Let's be clear. I was not arguing that God has turned his back on all those who belong to Israel by descent. He's reached out to the likes of me. I'm as much of a Jew as anyone.
2. This is part of a continuing pattern. God has not rejected the whole. There are some he foreknew, that is, whom he has chosen to receive his promises. It was the same in the time of Elijah who ended up pouring his heart out to God against what Israel was doing in his time.
3. Things were pretty bad. God's prophets were being killed and God's altars destroyed. Elijah thought he was the last person left who was faithful to God and he was being hunted down.
4. In fact, things were not as bad as he thought. God had in fact ensured that there were 7,000 within Israel who had stayed faithful to him.
5. The same applied in my own time. There was a remnant of Israel according to the flesh who, because of the generosity of God, had believed that God was keeping his promises through King Jesus.
6. However, I need to be clear. This was because of the generosity of God; it was like a gift. It wasn't because of anything we deserved or how we'd acted, because then it would not have been a gift.

This is a pattern in the story of Israel by descent. There are periods when the vast majority fail to see what God is doing. However, there is always a minority who, through the generosity of God, are enabled to stay faithful. It was more than Elijah in his day, and in my day, it was more than just me.

Verses 7–12 Insight into God's purposes

How shall we explain what went wrong? Israel by descent sought the fulfilment of God's promises and failed to get it. However, the chosen ones, the remnant, Israel after the promise, did receive those promises. The rest missed it. Scripture predicts that this would happen. The question then becomes, what is God's purpose behind this? We have said, as Isaiah prophesied, that Israel after the flesh has stumbled. Does this mean they are written off completely? Categorically not! It's all part of God's plan. The fact that much of Israel has missed the point, has created an opportunity for non-Jews which, going back to the earlier text, serves to make Israel jealous for its own promises. In other words,

Israel's transgression, in the workings of God's purposes, means that the non-Jews are receiving God's blessings. And just think how much greater the blessing would be if they were fully included!

7. This was my attempt to put it another way. Israel by descent failed to find what it was looking for. That is, it did not manage to see how God was fulfilling his ancient promises. The majority were hardened. Do you remember, we saw this idea with Pharaoh? They could not see that God had acted. However, because of God's generosity, a small number within Israel did understand.

8. At this point I cite texts which make the point. These are prophetic insights into the state of Israel. Sadly, they cannot see what's going on in front of their own eyes.

9. David makes much the same point when he speaks of something in the very centre of people lives becoming something they trip over.

10. David continues with this theme when he speaks of people being unable to see what is going on.

11. All this raises a question. Is this a matter of stumbling, by which I mean something serious but temporary? Or is it a matter of falling down in such a way that there is no prospect of getting up again? Is this hardening of heart permanent? My answer is that it's a matter of stumbling and this is something serious, but not something that need last forever. It's a temporary condition that, in the purposes of God, creates an opportunity for the non-Jews to have a share in salvation. And this is something that will provoke jealousy in Israel.

12. In fact, this temporary condition has resulted in the promised blessings of God becoming available to the whole world. And if Israel's stumbling accomplishes that, just imagine what blessings for everyone there will be if Israel does finally embrace what God has been doing! The Jews may still have a part to play in this story.

So that's the pattern that can be seen if you look at the story of Israel. There's always a line of promise which is a kind of spiritual Israel within physical Israel. Sometimes this part of Israel is very small indeed. It didn't necessarily stay that way. At the time I wrote this letter, spiritual Israel seemed pretty small, but that didn't necessarily mean it would always be that way. Indeed, the pattern of God's dealings with Israel suggests otherwise. Actually, the pattern is also there in the story of the true King of Israel, the true Israelite. King Jesus' story is one of life, death and new life. This is the pattern of God's dealings with his people and with the world.

Verses 13–16 There remains hope for Israel

Some of the non-Jews in Rome had missed all of this. They gave a different answer to the question I just raised. They thought that Israel's condition was final. They'd got it into their heads that God had completely lost patience with Israel according to the flesh, and this led to their getting some ideas that made them dismissive of Jewish people. So, I directed these words at them. Certainly, I was King Jesus' ambassador to the non-Jews and I was quite happy to talk up my calling but in part this was because I hoped to provoke jealousy in other Jews and that as a result some of them would come to accept what God has done in King Jesus. I saw it this way – if the leaving out of part of Israel has brought the rest of the world this astonishing message of reconciliation, then when Israel did accept

it, it would be like a resurrection. Think of it in terms of an offering. The first fruits represent the rest. The Jews who have already accepted Jesus are like the first fruits. They represent all the other Jews. Or to change the analogy, you can think of Israel as being like a tree. If the roots are good, then the branches will be good. Israel's roots are holy and so the branches are holy.

13. Some of the things I'd heard about the attitudes of some of the non-Jewish Christians towards the Jewish Christians and towards other Jews had given me cause for concern. I needed to help them towards a better understanding of their position. King Jesus had commissioned me as his ambassador to the non-Jewish nations. I think that's a really big deal, and I was prepared to talk up the ministry I'd been called to.

14. Nevertheless, it was important to bear in mind that, as we have seen, one of the reasons God had chosen to bless the work of the gospel among non-Jewish people was that this would make Jewish people jealous as they saw God's promises being fulfilled among other nations. This might mean that some of them would change their minds, see that God has indeed acted in King Jesus, and so come to share in the salvation being offered.

15. I suggested that the Romans should look at it this way. The exclusion of most of the Jews had enabled many non-Jews to be reconciled to God; the subsequent acceptance of those Jews would amount to a kind of resurrection. It would be like life from the dead!

16. I tried a couple of other illustrations. One from the rules for Temple offerings and the other from gardening. When you make an offering of dough, you only have to offer the first loaf. This offering stands for the rest. It makes the rest holy. Likewise, if you have a tree and the root of the tree is sound, the branches will also be sound. If the root is holy, the branches are holy.

I was clearing the ground for arguing that God has not permanently rejected the whole of physical Israel. Far from it. I held out the hope that at least some of them would, at some point, believe the gospel.

Verses 17-24 The people of God are like an olive tree

I presented the Romans with an illustration. They should think of the people of God as being like a cultivated, carefully nurtured olive tree with holy roots. Then they should think of God as being like a gardener who chooses to break off some of the natural branches so that there was space to graft in a shoot from a wild olive tree. This would enable the wild shoot to share nourishment from the roots of the tree. The last thing the wild shoot should be is arrogant with respect to the native branches. The root supports the wild grafting and not vice versa. It's no good boasting that you must be super important because others were cleared out to make space for you. Their unbelief meant they were broken off whereas your trust in God through King Jesus means you are grafted in. So, best not to get proud. If God was willing to break off the natural branches, you can be fairly sure that the wild ones could go too. God is both kind and severe. Severe to those cut off but kind to those grafted in. Be sure to appreciate his kindness or you could end up being broken away. And the unbelieving Jews, the branches broken off, well, if they come to trust, there's the prospect that they can be grafted back. In fact, to graft back a natural branch is much more straightforward than the task of grafting in a wild one.

17. Having offered two illustrations, I choose to work with the one about the tree. It's an olive tree because I knew these grow in the Holy Land and in Italy. I'd seen them in Tarsus too. Everyone in the audience would be familiar with them. I'm comparing the people of God to an olive tree and telling the story of Israel from this perspective. The people of God, Israel, is like God's cultivated olive tree. The non-Jews are like wild olive trees. It's as though God, the gardener, has chosen to break some of the branches off his cultivated olive and in their place has grafted on some branches from wild trees. This enables the wild branches to be nourished by the roots of the cultivated tree. The idea is that some of historical Israel has excluded itself from the people of God and this has created space for some non-Jews to become part of that people. Bear in mind what I said about the holiness of the root affecting the branches. The nourishment of the root makes the new branches holy. The non-Jews are not holy on their own account but by virtue of their being connected to historic people of God. The non-Jews who follow King Jesus have become grafted on to Israel according to the promise.

18. This means that the last thing the non-Jewish believers should ever do is boast about their situation. The grafted in branches should not boast over the branches that have been broken off nor indeed over the cultivated branches that remain. They need to remember that it is the root of the cultivated tree that nourishes them and makes them holy. They need the cultivated tree, but the cultivated tree does not need them.

19. Some might be tempted to brag about their own significance. They might think that they must be especially important because cultivated branches were broken off in order to make room for them.

20. Well, it's true that cultivated branches were broken off to make space for them but, as we have seen, those branches represent those Jews who have not trusted that God has acted to keep his promises. The non-Jews who are part of the people of God are only there because they have trusted in King Jesus. The last thing they should feel is pride as though this were their own accomplishment. Instead, they should be in awe at the astonishing generosity they have received.

21. Let's face it, if God was prepared to break off cultivated branches, he might well be prepared to break off the uncultivated ones. If some Jews could cease to be part of the people of God, the same must surely be true of non-Jews.

22. You can see from all this that God has acted with both kindness and severity. Those Jews who have not trusted have been severely treated. On the other hand, the non-Jews who have trusted in King Jesus have been very kindly treated. They should pray that God continues to be kind, or they too might find themselves rejected.

23. And they needed to understand this: those who are part of physical Israel who have been excluded from the people of God will, if they come to trust in what God has done, be restored to the people of God. For God is the gardener so has the power and the skill to graft them back into the cultivated olive tree.

24. You see, the non-Jews who trust in King Jesus are like branches broken from a wild olive tree and grafted into the cultivated tree which is the people of God. In a way this goes against the grain. It's a difficult operation. How much easier would it be to graft the broken off cultivated branches back into

the cultivated tree? There is a sense in which Jews are more naturally a part of the people of God, more disposed to trust in God's promises.

It should be clear from this that it was my hope that at least some of my brothers and sisters would embrace King Jesus. It's one of those great mysteries. I've hinted in places that I hope for a full inclusion of Israel. In others I've suggested that only some of them might be grafted back in. Looking back from my present perspective, I can see that over the years, plenty of Jews have embraced King Jesus, or have been embraced by him, and so I can say that they have been grafted back in. However, as yet, this has not happened for the Jewish community as a whole.

Verses 25–36 The great hope

This part of the argument, the part that reflects on God's dealings with Israel, is ending. It started with anguish at the start of chapter 9, and it ends in the praise of God at the end of chapter 11. It's all part of an established pattern that we see in the scriptures, and the way it operates is a mystery. As I have shown, only part of Israel is hardened, and this is a temporary thing. It will last until all the non-Jews – representatives from every nation on earth – who are going to come in, have come in. And that's the way that all Israel will be saved. After all, God promised a deliverer from Zion who would banish ungodliness from Israel and promised to take away their sins. This is what King Jesus has done. So, the unbelieving Jews are, in one sense, an enemy but, so far as being chosen is concerned, they are loved on account of their ancestors for God does not go back on his word. The non-Jews were once disobedient but have now received mercy, so now the unbelieving Jews are disobedient so that, when the time comes, they can receive mercy. In other words, both Jew and non-Jew go through disobedience so that God can be merciful to them.

25. The non-Jewish believers in Rome need to understand what is really going on. I have been exploring a great mystery. The current situation is not a permanent one. For a temporary period, I didn't know how long it would last, and I still don't; the Jews as a whole are still unable to see that God has acted in King Jesus. This period will last until all those who will come to believe from all the non-Jewish nations have become part of the people of God. The distinction between Israel according to descent and Israel according to the promise will last at least until all the non-Jews who are going to join have become part of the people of God. Then the hardening will fade and some or all of physical Israel will recover from its stumble.

26. This is the way that all spiritual Israel will share in salvation. The text that I quote is one that is about King Jesus. This is what God has already done.

27. God has kept this covenant promise by sending King Jesus to deal with the sin of Israel – as well as that of the rest of the world.

28. As far as the gospel is concerned, the announcement that, in King Jesus, God is keeping his ancient promises, the unbelieving Jews are enemies. That's a strong word and in retrospect I might choose a different one. My point is that they do not believe in what God is doing and some of them actively oppose it. Nevertheless, God loves them because it was their ancestors that he chose and that he loved.

29. And God cannot go back on the gifting and the calling of those ancestors.

30. The non-Jews who follow Jesus were once disobedient to God, but Jewish disobedience has, as I have argued above, created a space in which they have been shown God's mercy.

31. Let's press this a little further. At the time of writing, and this has persisted, most Jews were disobedient. This gave believing non-Jews a space in which they could receive mercy. This may well lead, in turn, to a future situation in which the unbelieving Jews have an opportunity to receive mercy.

32. There's a pattern here. Every type of human has experienced a time of disobedience so that God has the opportunity to offer mercy to them all.

33. God really does have it all worked out. However, we struggle to keep up! We may not understand but God knows what he is doing.

34. As the prophet so rightly points out, God really doesn't need advice or a consultancy service from the likes of us!

35. A similar point is made in the book of Job. God does not need us. There's no reciprocity in this relationship. God is the giver, not us.

36. God made everything and it's all for God and it's all about God and it's all for the glory of God.

I must admit I got a bit carried away after I'd written all of that. I felt the need for some doxology, some prayer glorifying God's mysterious purposes. As you can see, I held out the hope that at least some Jews would come to trust in King Jesus, and over the generations that has happened. I also expressed the hope that as the gospel became known in all the non-Jewish nations, the Jews would come to trust in greater numbers. This has yet to happen. However, there have turned out to be far more non-Jewish nations than I could possibly have envisaged at the time I wrote. No doubt God still has some surprises in store. I think that it's important to grasp that there is only one people of God. It can be pictured as an olive tree. The roots of the tree are the ancestors of the Jews who received God's promises. When God acted to fulfil those promises, some Jewish people could not accept what he'd done and the result was that they, for a time at least, ceased to be a part of the people of God. At the same time, non-Jews who did accept what God had done became part of the people of God. When all the non-Jews, or all the ones destined to do so, have joined God's people, then it will be the turn of the rest of physical Israel, or all those Jews destined to do so, to become a part of the people of God.

Please remember that I wrote all this almost two thousand years ago. I didn't know when I wrote it how long the periods would last or quite how much animosity there would be between Gentiles who claimed to follow Jesus and the Jewish people. In its context this was a plea for mutual respect and an expression of hope of eventual unity. It also tried to see it all in terms of the God who created us all.