

BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS #11

Scripture of Lesson: Romans 11: 1~36

In Chapter 10 Apostle Paul pointed out that the Jews sought to worship God without knowledge; that is, they misunderstood God's salvation as can be attained with works, not through faith in Jesus Christ. In fact they did not heed the crying of numerous prophets that God had sent them. In this chapter Paul draws out attention to God's work among the remnant in each generation. However, Paul still considers his people of Israel as the main stock of God's olive tree, onto whose branch the Gentiles are being grafted. And Paul looks forward to a future time when all Israel is saved through the Messiah in the latter days.

1. God has saved a remnant of Israel: v. 1~10

One may argue that, if God has fore knowledge of the hearts of all people and predestined His elect in each generation, why did He care to plead with the people through the prophets, many of whom were persecuted or killed by their leaders and people in general? Here, Paul cites the case of Elijah, who was so discouraged because of the utter rejection of God and himself as a servant of God by the king, the queen and the people of Israel, and went into a remote wilderness cave in a dejected spirit. God, however, fed him a number of days through a raven and encouraged him to get up and do His commands by pointing out to him that He had reserved some seven thousand people whose had not knelt before Baal [v.4]. God has never given up on His chosen people and has employed the devoted services of His servants to speak messages of warning and calling back.

This story about Elijah illustrates that we are not alone, that God works among people and there is a great number of His people (remnant) in the world who share the same vision, values and goals as we do [v.5]. Paul points out the remnant of each generation gained God's grace of election [v. 6] and the balance of the people were left in their stupor/ slumber or spiritual insensitivity. This is an awful condition where God has lost hope of them ever awakening to their spiritual need of their Savior and of ever coming to Him in repentance and cry of help. As God looks on the present world and finds people seeped in complacency, immersed in fun and pleasure, insensitive to the needs of our neighbors such as the poor, the hungry and the sick and those crying for justice and mercy of God.

Discussion topic: God's election of a remnant in each generation has found a select group of true believers down through the times until today. Are we a part of this elect of God today?

2. Paul's yearning towards his own people as the main olive tree: v. 11~24

In verse 11 Paul expresses a strange yearning towards his people that they become jealous of the Gentiles for accepting the Messiah whom they had rejected so that salvation has come to the Gentiles but somehow they themselves are not sure of their own salvation [v. 11]. Paul was hoping that the spiritual wealth of the Gentiles might provoke the Jews to come to their senses [v. 14]. This never happened in past centuries, sad to say. But we should pray that this day does come in the near future, when the Jews come to their senses and realize how much of God's grace they have been missing, and that they come to desire to be grafted back to the main stock of God's olive tree, realizing that they have been cut off from His mercy and grace.

Paul teaches the Gentile readers not to be boastful towards the Jews in this regard [v. 18-21]. But what Paul was deadly afraid and warned against did happen in a massive scale after Paul's martyrdom. Christians have demonstrated their hatred towards the Jews and "Christ killers" through hideous acts of persecution, genocide and shameful crusades. Such acts of the Christians, mostly led or tolerated by the Church, remain as blood-stained records of shame towards the main stock of God's olive tree, whom Paul so earnestly wanted to bring to God's grace. The right attitude of all Christians towards the Jewish people should be one of empathy, compassion and heartfelt yearning to bring them to the knowledge of Christ Jesus so that they might become one with the Christians and enjoy God's grace and love together.

Discussion topic: What has been your view of the Jews and Israel so far? How does Paul's description of Israel as the main body of God's olive tree change your view about Israel?

3. Israel's eventual salvation: v. 23~36

Paul is confident that God is well able to bring all Israel to salvation. Paul seems to be aware of Jesus' prophecy about Israel in Luke 21:

"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. [Luke 21: 20-24]

Verses 20-23 refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman troops in AD 70, which Jesus prophesied. It is interesting that Jesus refers to this period of violence as "days of vengeance." God's wrath was kindled against the Jewish nation and their hardness of heart that ended up with killing of the Son of God through this utter destruction of Israel and the temple, in which the Jewish people took great pride in. Then, Jesus prophesied that "Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Many theologians have different opinions about what Jesus meant by "the times of the Gentiles."

Here in Romans 11, Paul expresses his interpretation of this prophecy in verses 25-26. Paul interprets that much of Israel will remain spiritually blind until the "fullness of the Gentiles" are brought into God's fold. Many theologians, however, believe that the times of the Gentiles are past because the nation of Israel has been established and the physical jurisdiction over the city of Israel is in the hands of Israeli government today since 1980. In addition Paul predicts that "all Israel shall be saved [v. 26]." Here, Paul cites a verse from Isaiah's prophecy:

"The Redeemer will come to Zion, And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," says the Lord. [Isaiah 59: 20]

Paul emphasizes to the Gentile readers that, although they were not receptive of the gospel of Christ, the people of Israel are still chosen people of God in that God does not revoke His earlier choice of a people as His people [v. 28-29]. Because they were disobedient, the evangelical work of Christ turned to the Gentiles. This is thanks to God's intent that all peoples, Gentiles and Jews, might equally obtain God's mercy and grace [v. 30]. We should pray for the Jewish people, take opportunities as they arise to witness

Christ to them, and support the evangelical work amongst the Jews. We know the prophecy of Jesus about the fall of Jerusalem including total destruction of the temple was fulfilled in AD 70. And the retaking of Jerusalem by Israel occurred in 1980. Then we can expect the prophecy of Paul about the returning of Israel to God's salvation is happening and will accelerate as we speak.

We are thankful that Paul shared the depths of his understanding of God's plan and will concerning salvation. We can truly say that God saw in Saul a highly useful vessel for His work. Without his detailed exposition of God's plans and intentions with full references to the Old Testament characters, events and laws, we would have difficult time understanding the depths of the knowledge of Christ and of God's salvation plan. Paul does not pride in his understanding of this knowledge. He says all things come from God, of God and by God. Thus, we ought to give glory to God only. Amen.

Discussion topic: How do the recent developments of Israel's establishment as a nation in Palestine and its struggle for survival affect your view about the Jewish people and Israel? Are we waiting for the Lord's return in the near future?