Romans Lesson 19 (2018)

**THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL**

Romans 11:1-36

Key Verse: 11:13-14

“I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.”

There have been numerous nations, people and cultures that have flourished and declined in the history of humankind. However, survivors of those ancient nations, people and cultures can no longer be found today. If there were a single nation that still exists with its clear ethnic identity, ancient religion and culture, the nation Israel comes first on the list. In fact, after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Roman army, the nation Israel disappeared and the people of Israel were scattered all over the world. For nearly 2,000 years, they didn’t have their homeland. During World War II, nearly six million Jews were killed by Nazi Germany. In fact, it was not until 1948 that the nation Israel returned to its homeland and established the Jewish State (2018).

Paul’s primary concern in Romans Chapters 9-11 is the nation Israel, her past, present and future. In Chapters 9 and 10, Paul has dealt with the problem of Israel’s failure to receive Christ by highlighting two things: God’s sovereign choice and Israel’s rejection through their self-righteousness. Now in Chapter 11, Paul deals with the future of the Jewish people. Most of us here, who are not Jewish, might wonder, “*What does the future of Israel have to do with us who live in the 21st century?”* The content of Chapter 11 appears to be irrelevant to most of us. However, the future of Israel has a significant impact on everyone because it reveals God’s mysterious plan for all people through them. Let’s think about what plan God has for the future of the Jewish people and what attitude we should have toward them.

Look at verse 1a. “I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means!” Here, Paul clearly declares that in spite of Israel’s rejection of God, he has not rejected them. In verses 1-6, Paul gives several examples of why he believed so.

Look at verse 1b. “I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.” Here, Paul uses himself as the first example of his argument. He was saying, *“Look at me! I am a Jew. Remember who I was before meeting Christ? I was a blasphemous and hardened person. But only by the grace of God, I am saved and I even became an apostle of Jesus Christ.”* Even though Paul didn’t mention it here, the fact is that the Twelve Apostles and the first 120 believers of Christ who became the courageous witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection were all Jewish (Acts 1-2). The founders of the New Testament Church were all Jewish believers. They were also chosen by God’s grace. God surely didn’t reject the Jews.

Look at verse 2a. “God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.” The word “foreknew” reminds us of Paul’s argument on God’s election in Chapter 9, in which we were told that those whom God had foreknown cannot be rejected by God. Here, Paul was referring the term “his people” to the nation Israel, not to individuals. For his argument, he uses the case of Elijah in 2b-4. Look at verses 2b-4. “Don’t you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah – how he appealed to God against Israel: ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me’? And what was God’s answer to him? ‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’” Surely, the Prophet Elijah was a great servant of God, who courageously fought against evil kings, false prophets, and priests of the time. However, after winning the battle over the false priests and prophets on Mt. Carmel, Elijah became totally exhausted and began to think that he was the only remnant of God left in Israel. He appealed to God, “*I have had enough, Lord. Take my life…I am the only one left.”* (1 Kings 19:4, 10, 14)

Yet, what Elijah didn’t realize was that he was not the only remnant of God in Israel and that God had reserved seven thousand faithful remnants for himself. We don’t know who these seven thousand remnants were. But what we know is that they were the ones whom God had chosen according to his foreknowledge. God didn’t reject his people.

Look at verses 5-7. “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened.” In these verses, Paul concludes that there is a remnant chosen by God in each generation. In fact, Paul was emphasizing that there is only one way of salvation in God’s plan and there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. God’s way of salvation for any person is always by grace, not by works. Even though God’s grace is always available in every generation, people who harden their hearts would not receive God’s salvation. In other words, the majority of the Jews failed not because God rejected them but because they hardened their hearts.

In verses 8-10, Paul quotes from several passages from the Old Testament in order to support his argument (Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 29:10; Psalm 69:22-23; 35:9 38:4). Look at verses 8-10. “As it is written: ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day.’ And David says: ‘May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.’”

Look at verse 11a. “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all!” Here, we see Paul raising the same question again because the reality was that even though small a number of God’s remnants were saved, the majority of the Jews still remained in rebellion against God. So the question is “*Is there any hope for the Jewish people as a whole?” “Does God have a plan for them?” or “Are they over as God’s chosen people?”* What do you think? According to Paul, Israel’s failure is not permanent or beyond recovery. In fact, God’s grace toward Israel will result not just in salvation of a few remnants of Israel but also in the salvation of the whole nation (25-26a).

Before arriving at that conclusion, Paul explains first the results of Israel’s rejection in verses 11-15, and then the crucial role of Jewish roots in God’s redemptive history in verses 16-24. Look at verses 11b-15. “Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead.” Before we get into the details, I want us to read God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3, which states, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” According to this promise, it’s very clear that God established Abraham as the ancestor of faith and a source of blessing not just for the Jews but also for the people of all nations.

However, it was Israel’s sin of rejection that resulted in the salvation of the Gentiles. But Paul also said something very interesting, that the salvation of the Gentiles was to make the Jews envious (11b), and thus God intends to save Israel someday and bring a rich blessing for all of humankind (12, 15). Paul also went on to say that one of the goals of his ministry was to make his own people envy and save some of them (14). How does the salvation of the Gentiles make Israel envious? Here, envy may not refer to its selfish desire but to the desire of something really excellent. A Jewish medical doctor took care of a Christian lady who was very old and about to die. Yet, he noticed that she had such peace, joy and love in her heart. And when her husband came, both he and the woman were very thankful to the doctor who took care of her. The doctor was envious of them, wondering *“How can these people have such wonderful peace, joy, love and even gratitude when they face death? They are Christians.”* The doctor began to read the Bible, of course the New Testament, and was converted. And he wrote a book, ‘Why I became a Christian?”

Look at verse 16. “If the part of the dough offered as first-fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.” It’s hard to know exactly what Paul meant here. However, according to verses 17-24, it seems that Paul was trying to explain the crucial role of Jewish roots in God’s redemptive history. Read verses 17-24. “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.’ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the nature branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!” Christianity is deeply rooted in the Jewish spiritual heritage. We have Jewish Patriarchs, a Jewish Bible and a Jewish Messiah. Even though many Jews were broken off because of their unbelief, it does not mean God is over with the Jewish people. They are God’s loved ones and God can restore them because they were the originals (Pic#1).

In fact, Paul teaches the Gentile believers the kind of attitude they should have toward God and the Jews, including even the unbelieving Jews. He warns us by saying, “Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches” (18), “Do not be arrogant, but tremble” (20), “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God.” In fact, God does not want any of his children to be boastful, proud or arrogant for any reason. Instead, we, as Gentile believers, should have holy fear and be thankful for God’s mercy and grace while we also respect the Jews and see unbelieving Jews in God’s hope of salvation.

In verses 25-36, Paul concludes the section by saying that God is not only able to restore the nation of Israel into her original position but he will also surely do it. Look at verses 25-26a. “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.” I was curious about how many messianic Jews are there in the world today. According to statistics, there are over 1,000 Hebrew Christian missionary groups that spend over $300 million annually, targeting Jewish people for conversion. And there are 175,000-250,000 Messianic Jews in the U.S. and 350,000 worldwide. But comparing to 16 million Jewish people in the world today, 350,000 is still a small number.

The phrase “all Israel will be saved” does not mean that every single Jewish person in history will be saved. Many people think that Paul must mean that the majority of the Jews will be saved right before Jesus’ second coming. But it may also mean the possibility of a steady but growing flow of Jews into Christianity until the second coming of Jesus Christ (P.T.K). In verses 26b-27, Paul quotes several Scripture verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa. 59:20,21, 27:9; Jer. 31:33,34), “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” (26b-27)

Look at verses 28 and 29. “As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs; for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.” These verses show that even though the nation Israel rejected God’s call, the fact that they are God’s chosen people does not change. Moreover, in God’s due time, there will be a great spiritual revival among the Jewish people. And we will see a lot of Jewish Christians (messianic Jews) will stand up for the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Jewish Undergraduate Students Enrollment/ QC-4,000 [23%], NYU-3500 [12%], Columbia-1500 [24%])

Look at verses 30-32. “Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.” In these verses, Paul states that God uses each group, Jews and Gentiles, in some way to show mercy to the others. He also highlights that the ground of God’s salvation for Jews and Gentiles is the same, God’s mercy.

Verses 33-36 are called “*Doxology*” which is Paul’s song of praise. Having described God’s mysterious salvation plan in Chapters 1-11, Paul didn’t claim to know everything about God’s redemptive plan. Instead, he suddenly began to praise and worship God for his infinite wisdom and knowledge, saying “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”(33) While admitting the limitation of human understanding (34-35), Paul gives all the glory, honor and praise to him by saying “To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (36)

Let us close this sermon. As we see what is going on in the world today, it’s easy to be disheartened, like the Prophet Elijah who was very negative about him and the world. But what we should never forget is that God never fails in what he desires to do. In each generation God always has His chosen people. At present, he is working to save his lost ones through his remnants in every corner of the world. There is also a great hope for the future of the world through the restoration of his people Israel. And that will bring even more blessings to the whole world. But that’s not under our control.

We know that evangelism is hard. To bring even one person to Christ is not easy. Paul said that he preached the gospel to the Gentiles so that he could arouse his own people to envy and save some of them. But how can we make anyone to envy and save them when our weakness and shortcomings are obvious to others? Surely, we cannot pretend to be perfect. Well, surely we need to study the Bible with them. But what we really need is absolute trust in Jesus Christ. In other words, we should be an authentic person in Christ Jesus, not being afraid of showing our vulnerability and limitation but depending on Jesus Christ all the time, so that others may see Christ living in us. We also need to build up the relationship of trust and respect with great patience, so that others may open their hearts to Christ Jesus. But we must know that we should abide in Jesus, because apart from him we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5). God always has his people chosen by his grace in each generation. May the Lord help us to find them and share the good news of God’s salvation.