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CAN GOD'S PROMISES FAIL?

Romans 11:1-6

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Romans Lesson 67

Can God's Promises Fail? Romans 11:1-6

At first glance, a chapter like Romans 11 that deals with the subject of whether God still has a purpose for the Jews might seem irrelevant to your life. What does the future of Israel have to do with finding a marriage partner or staying happy with the one you've got? What does Israel's future have to do with the pressures of work and paying bills? How can it help you as you struggle to rear your children in this evil world? What relevance does this topic have as you struggle with personal problems or health problems? Maybe you ought to check out for a few weeks and check back in when we get to the practical stuff in Romans 12!

Let me suggest several reasons that this subject should be of interest to you. First, the underlying issue that Paul is dealing with in Romans 11 is, "Can God's promises fail?" God chose the nation of Israel as His people apart from all other nations on earth (Deut. 7:6). Through the prophet Jeremiah, God assured the sinful nation that was about to go into captivity that His promises to Israel could never fail (Jer. 31:35-36; 33:19-26). To dispel the thought that Israel's sin could lead to their permanent rejection, God added (Jer. 31:37), "Thus says the Lord, 'If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done,' declares the Lord."

In other words, if God rejects Israel as His people, then His promises can fail. And if His promises to Israel fail, then how can we know that His promises to us in Romans 8 will not fail? And since those promises include working all of our trials together for good (8:28) and His promise that no trial can ever cut us off from His love (8:35-39), the question of why God has seemingly rejected Israel becomes very practical! It boils down to, "Can you trust God to do as He promises?"

Second, on a broader scale, if you pay any attention to the news, you've no doubt felt at times that the world is out of control and that the bad guys are winning. You see the horrors of terror-

ism, war, and natural disasters that wipe out thousands. You hear about terrible crimes toward little children. You read about corruption in government both here and abroad. You hear about Christians getting killed by the Muslims. The list goes on and on. Sometimes it can be depressing to the point that you wonder whether God is really in charge of world events. Romans 11 shows us that He is in charge and that His promises and His purpose will not fail.

This chapter also shows us how we should view the Jewish people. Some Christians are so pro-Israel that they wrongly shrug off Israel's persecution of Palestinian believers, who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. On the other hand, sadly there are professing Christians who are anti-Semitic. During the atrocities of the Holocaust, many of Germany's professing Christians tacitly went along with Hitler's evil agenda. But Romans 11 shows that as Christians, we should love Jewish people and seek to bring them to know Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. My understanding of Romans 11 is that in the future, the Jewish people will turn to Christ in unprecedented numbers. God is not finished with the Jews.

One other practical value of Romans 11 is that it helps us to look beyond ourselves to God's great purpose for history, which should lead us to worship Him for His glorious ways. Paul ends the chapter with an outburst of praise as he is caught up with the truths that he writes about here. Sometimes we get so self-focused that we forget that our eyes should be on God and His glory. His plan includes us, but it's not ultimately about us. It's about His glory being displayed over the whole earth (Hab. 2:14; Isa. 11:9). Our lives take on eternal significance as we devote ourselves to this eternal purpose of God.

Before we look at our text, I want to give a brief review to show how chapter 11 fits into the context of Romans and a brief overview of the whole chapter. After setting forth the gospel of God's grace and how it applies to our daily walk (Rom. 1-8), Paul expressed his heartfelt sorrow over the fact that the majority of the Jews were rejecting Christ (9:1-5). He went on in Romans 9 to show that God's promises to the Jews had not failed because He never promised to save the entire nation. Rather, He sovereignly determined to save a remnant (9:6-13). Paul's emphasis throughout Romans 9 is on God's sovereignty. He has mercy on whom He

desires and He hardens whom He desires (9:18). God's purpose is to make known the riches of His glory on vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory (9:23). This purpose included extending His mercy to the Gentiles.

But then, what about the Jews? Was God somehow unjust in His dealings with them? Of course not! Paul goes on (9:30-10:21) to show that the Jews were responsible for their own rejection of God's mercy in Christ. They are without any excuse. So in chapter 9 Paul makes the point that if anyone is saved, it is solely because of God's sovereign mercy in choosing him for salvation. In Romans 10, he makes the point that if anyone is lost, it is because of his own stubborn hardness of heart. He can't blame God for not choosing him.

But now, in chapter 11, Paul takes up God's plan for the Jews as it pertains to the future. Is God done with the Jews because of their terrible sin of crucifying their Messiah? Paul answers strongly (11:1): "May it never be!" In 11:1-10, Paul shows that God's rejection of Israel is partial, not total. God has always preserved a remnant of Jewish believers. God's sovereign purpose is never thwarted by human sin. Then (11:11-32) Paul shows that God's rejection of Israel is temporary, not permanent. He has temporarily hardened the Jews in judgment until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. Then God will open the hearts of the Jews so that "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). Romans 11:30-32 sums up 11:1-29:

For just as you [Gentiles] once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their [the Jews] disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

Then Paul ends the chapter (11:33-36) with a glorious outburst of praise to God for the wonders of His unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways. With that as a review and overview, let's focus on 11:1-6, where Paul makes the point:

That God's promises might fail is unthinkable, because they rest on His sovereign, gracious choice, not on anything in fallen humanity.

God has not rejected His chosen people, but has preserved a remnant according to His gracious choice. Since the choice of the remnant and its preservation depend on God's grace and not on human works or choice, God's promises cannot fail.

1. For God to reject the people whom He has foreknown would be unthinkable (11:1-4).

Paul begins with a rhetorical question (11:1a), "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He?" He immediately retorts, "May it never be!" He then illustrates this by mentioning himself. He is a Jewish believer in the Lord Jesus. Then he adds (11:2a), "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew." He follows this with the illustration from Elijah's life, where the prophet erroneously thought that he was the only faithful man left in Israel. But God informed him that He still had 7,000 men in Israel who had not bowed their knee to Baal. Paul is arguing that the thought that God's promises might fail because a majority of the Jews were rejecting Christ is simply unthinkable. God's promises rest on His sovereign, gracious choice, not on anything in rebellious sinners. If God's promises could fail, then God would cease to be God, because His faithfulness to His Word is an essential part of His being.

- A. The fact that God has not rejected His people is illustrated in the present by Paul himself, a Jewish believer in Jesus Christ (11:1b).

Romans 11:1b: "For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Some scholars read various meanings into why Paul added that he was a descendant of Abraham and of the tribe of Benjamin. But I think that all he was doing was establishing that he was a physical Jew (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 409). In other words, he is not talking about being a spiritual Israelite by faith in Christ (Rom. 9:6; Gal. 3:7), but rather about being a Jew by natural birth. Through the entire chapter, Paul focuses on Israel as a nation. So in verse 1 Paul is saying, "If you argue that God has rejected the Jews, then how do you explain my conversion? I'm as Jewish as you can be, and yet God saved me."

Humanly speaking Paul's conversion was the most unlikely event imaginable. The believers in Jerusalem were at first wary of

his conversion (Acts 9:26), thinking that it might be just a ploy to get inside the church, where he could persecute even more Christians. Their reaction was only natural, since Paul described himself prior to his conversion as “being furiously enraged at” believers (Acts 26:11), “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor” (1 Tim. 1:13). Yet he was shown mercy. Paul’s conversion stands as one of the greatest proofs both of the power of the gospel to save sinners and of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus, who appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road. His conversion should encourage us to pray and work for the salvation of those who are the most strongly opposed to the gospel.

B. The fact that God has not rejected His people is based on the truth that in eternity He foreknew them (11:2a).

Romans 11:2a: “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.” There are a couple of matters to clear up in this statement. First, *foreknew* does *not* mean that God knew in advance that Israel would choose Him, so He decided to make them His chosen people. Some try to explain *foreknowing* that way to dodge the doctrine of election (in Rom. 8:29; 1 Pet. 1:1-2; refer to my messages on those texts for more explanation).

But that is not the meaning of the Greek word. If it only refers to knowing something in advance, then God foreknows *all* people, not just Israel. He knows everything before it happens. Greek scholars are virtually unanimous in saying that the word means that God chose in advance to set His love on Israel. He determined to enter into a special relationship with Israel. In Amos 3:2 God states with regard to Israel, “You only have I chosen [lit., *known*] among all the families of the earth.” So Paul’s point is that because God predetermined to know Israel as His special people, it is impossible that He would now reject them.

The other matter to clear up is that when Paul says (11:2a), “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew,” he is not talking about the elect remnant of true believers within the larger nation of Israel (9:6; 11:5; Charles Hodge argues for this). That would be stating the obvious: “God didn’t reject those whom He chose to believe in Him.” Paul’s purpose in the entire chapter is to argue that God is not finished with the nation in spite of her unbelief and sin. And in the immediate context, Paul is arguing that the

presence of an elect remnant (Paul and the 7,000 in Elijah's time) indicates that God has not rejected the nation as a whole from His covenant purposes, in spite of their unbelief.

So when Paul mentions "God's people whom He foreknew," he is referring to God's choosing the entire nation of Israel corporately as His people, not that He chose them all for salvation. "His people" in verse 1 and "His people" in verse 2 both refer to the entire nation. Leon Morris explains (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 399), "Paul appears to have in mind that God chose Israel to be his people, the people in whom his purpose would be worked out in a special way."

So in our text, Paul is emphasizing God's sovereignty as the foundation of His faithfulness to His promises. If He is not sovereign, then He may not be able to keep His promises. Human sin might thwart His purpose. But if God is sovereign, then it would be unthinkable for Him to choose a nation as His people and then to turn around and reject them totally.

Thus the fact that God has not rejected His people is illustrated in the present by Paul himself, a Jewish believer in Christ. It also is based on the truth that in eternity God foreknew Israel.

- C. The fact that God has not rejected His people is illustrated in the past by the story of Elijah, where God kept for Himself a remnant of faithful men (11:2b-4).

Romans 11:2b-4: "Or do you not know what the Scripture says in *the passage about Elijah*, how he pleads with God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.' But what is the divine response to him? 'I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'"

Paul uses this familiar story to argue that the presence of an elect remnant shows that God has not cast off Israel as a whole. Even though the majority of Israel in Elijah's day had fallen into idolatry, so much so that the prophet thought that he was the only faithful one left, God had preserved a faithful remnant. This demonstrated that God was not through with His people in spite of their sin. Paul applies this principle to his present situation (11:5). Even though most Jews were unbelieving, the existence of a faith-

ful remnant of believing Jews shows that God has not cast off national Israel from His covenant promises. Note two things:

First, the emphasis in the Elijah story is on God's action as the decisive reason that a remnant was preserved: "I have kept for Myself..." Paul underscores this in 11:5, where he refers to "a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (lit., *the choice of grace*). The existence of a faithful remnant was not primarily due to their resolve to stay faithful during a difficult time, although they did obey God. Rather, the reason that they stayed faithful was that God kept them for Himself.

Second, the fact that God worked through a remnant in Elijah's time and in Paul's time shows that He doesn't need great numbers to accomplish His sovereign purposes. Sometimes we may feel as Elijah did, that there are few who do not bow to the idols of our time. Many who profess to be Christians try to pressure us to be more tolerant of false doctrine and not to be so divisive. But by God's grace, His remnant always refuses to bow to the world's idols.

Thus Paul's first point is that for God to reject the people whom He has foreknown would be unthinkable.

2. We can trust that God will be faithful to His promises because they rest on His sovereign, gracious choice, not on anything in us (11:5-6).

Paul makes two points here:

- A. The existence of a remnant of believers today rests on God's gracious choice, not on their choice (11:5).

Romans 11:5: "In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice." Paul is drawing a logical inference from the story of Elijah. Just as God worked through a remnant that He sovereignly preserved in that day, so in our day He sovereignly chooses those whom He saves and preserves for His purpose. Thomas Schreiner explains (*Romans* [Baker], p. 582):

The existence of a remnant of believing Jews is not ultimately ascribed to their greater wisdom or nobility, or to their free will, or to their spiritual perception. The inclusion of the rem-

nant in God's people is due to his electing grace.... The only reason some Jews believe is because God has graciously and mercifully chosen them to be a part of His people....

I realize that many don't like the doctrine of election, but if you reject it, you're wiping out the foundation for assurance of salvation. Everett Harrison puts it (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 10:117), "The sparing of the remnant is inseparably related to the choice of the remnant." God won't forsake those whom He chose. The link between verses 4 & 5 is not that there are faithful people in every age, but rather that God's sovereign choice insures that there are faithful people in every age (see John Piper, "For God's Sake, Let Grace be Grace," on desiringGod.org). So if you're a part of God's remnant, you can't take pride in yourself for your wise choice of God or for His choice of you. Rather, you can only boast in God, who chose you by His grace (undeserved favor) alone.

B. God's gracious choice means that His promises do not rest on anything in us, or grace would not be grace (11:6).

Romans 11:6: "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace." In some ways, verse 6 is not essential in the flow of Paul's argument, but he felt the need to insert this explanation of the nature of grace, because we all have a built in propensity toward works rather than grace.

Note that Paul does not contrast works and faith here, but rather works and grace. "Works" refers to anything that we can do in and of ourselves. If we have the ability by our own free will to believe in Christ (as many argue), then faith is something that we sinful humans are capable of doing on our own. But that turns faith into a work in which we can boast. If (as also many argue) God chose us because He foresaw that we would believe by our own free will, then He didn't choose us according to His grace, but on the basis of something that we would do. In other words, if salvation is a joint effort where God does His part and now it's up to us to do our part, then grace is no longer grace.

By "no longer," Paul doesn't mean that salvation used to be by works, but now it's by grace. He's using "no longer" in a logical sense, not chronological (Schreiner, p. 583). As Leon Morris ex-

plains (p. 402), "Paul is saying that once we have come to see that salvation is by grace there is no longer any place for works."

I fear that many Christians do not understand in a practical way what Paul means when he says that we are saved by God's "gracious choice" (11:5), not by anything that we do. We all innately want to offer God something that we think is good in ourselves, so that He will accept us. We want to think, "I was saved by my faith." But if I think that my faith was something that I came up with, then I have grounds to boast in myself. No, we're saved by God's grace through faith, and the whole package is His gift (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29; Acts 11:18). If any part of salvation is my doing, then grace is no longer grace.

Conclusion

Can God's promises fail? If they're based on anything in fallen humanity, then they easily could fail. But if they're based on His sovereign, gracious choice, then God's promises are rock solid.

Adoniram Judson, who spent his life taking the gospel to Burma, once said in the midst of his many trials, "The future is as bright as the promises of God" (cited in *Christian History & Biography* [Spring, 2006], pp. 6, 40). He didn't live to see much visible fruit for his years of hardship. But today, with only 49 million people, Burma has over 2 million Baptists, the third largest number of any nation. Only the United States and India have more (*ibid.*, p. 40). Judson, who believed in God's sovereign grace, knew that His promises could not fail. So no matter what your trials, if you have received God's grace in Christ, you have a bright future because His promises cannot fail.

Application Questions

1. How does this portion of God's Word relate to the problems or trials that you are currently facing?
2. Do a word study on "foreknowledge" or "foreknow." Why is it practically important to understand that it does not just mean "to know in advance"?
3. Have you ever felt as Elijah did? How did you work through it?
4. What are some other practical lessons from the fact that God works through a remnant chosen by His grace?

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