

Prayer

Save us, O Lord, from the many temptations placed before us by the world in which we live. We are surrounded by pressures that invite everyone to enjoy or take part in all manner of deviant human behaviour, such as greed, avarice, and sexual license. Turn our eyes from temptation and fix them on You, O Lord, and help us see each temptation for what it is, and live in a manner worthy of our calling. Thank You Lord, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Paperwork

Within many countries, the amount of paper used for information storage and communication grows rapidly. We will pray this week for God to guide in our use of this basic resource.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for women who are marginalised within society*
- *Pray for world leaders and the consequences of their meetings*
- *Give thanks for the life God has given you, and for His love*

Meditation

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

Serve Him by living the life of a servant:

And loving others, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Serve the Lord by giving Him your worship:

Singing and dancing, and joining the praises of His people!

Serve Him by fulfilling His Commission:

To take the Good News of Christ to the ends of the earth.

Serve Him as His priests in the world:

Doing everything to work and pray for the good of others.

Serve the Lord as an honest disciple:

Living every and every day according to His touch on your life.

Serve the Lord by fighting against evil:

And wherever you find it, stand against it in the name of Christ.

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

There is no reward, save fulfilment and peace with the Lord.

Bible Study - Romans 11:1-12

¹ I ask then, has God rejected His people? Certainly not! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected His people whom he chose. Do you not know what happened in Scripture when Elijah appealed to God against Israel: ³ 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, demolished Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are trying to take my life?' ⁴ But what is God's reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand people who have not offered worship to Ba'al.' ⁵ Therefore, in the same way, there is at the present time a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ Now, if this is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of deeds, for if it were, grace would no longer be grace. ⁷ What then has happened? Israel failed to find what it was seeking. The chosen few found it, but the rest were hardened.

⁸ As it is written,

'God gave them a numb and senseless spirit;

eyes that would not see

and ears that would not hear,

down to this very day.'

⁹ And David says:

'May their table become a snare and a trap,

A stumbling-block and a reprisal ¹¹ I therefore ask, did they stumble in order to utterly fall? By no means! Instead, through their stumbling, salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous! for them.

¹⁰ Let their eyes grow dim so that they cannot see,
and with their backs bent over for ever.

¹¹ I therefore ask, did they stumble in order to utterly fall? By no means! Instead, through their stumbling, salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous! ¹² If then, their sinfulness means riches for the rest of the world, and their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater a gain there will be if they are fully included!

Thought for the day

Text

Romans 11:11

¹¹ I therefore ask, did they stumble in order to utterly fall? By no means! Instead, through their stumbling, salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous!

Thought

While continuing to speak about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles, Paul confirms the truth of the matter. The entire Christian heritage has come out of the Jewish experience of God, and in particular, their 'stumbling' over the revelation of God through Christ.

The Christian can do no other than to give thanks to God for all He has done through His people, the Jews. This does not mean that we take a political stance over the state of Israel today or at any point in its history; it means that we acknowledge our debt to the revelation of God through the Israelite people, and remember that Jesus was a Jew.

Review

In this passage, Paul returns to his theme of the rejection of Christ by the Jews. It is not always easy to follow Paul as he jumps between passages of Scripture to make his points, which often do not seem relevant to us today. However, it is worth persisting because it is important to know that God will be faithful. We must have an explanation of God's faithfulness so that we can be confident in the promises he makes to us through Christ today. We do not want to find out at some time in the future that because of our own difficulties, God is suddenly going to ditch us! This may sound somewhat unreal given the nature of Christian faith, but some people do indeed conclude that the God in whom they once believed has let them down, and they have left the church. From their perspective, God has let them down. It is therefore imperative that we have a good understanding of God's faithfulness.

To deal with this issue, Paul uses a variety of Scriptures to explain that God does not completely reject the Jewish people. He explains yet again that God's choice is not confined to the people of Israel (11:2-4), and he continues to insist that God has always worked by grace to make His choice, and not merely by keeping the 'Law' (11:5,6). Our passage then picks up a new point not yet emphasised but found within the Old Testament prophets. Paul explains the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews as a matter of spiritual 'blindness' (11:7,8) and this causes their stumbling and difficulty with the Gospel (11:9,10). Even this, Paul says, has proved to be something God can use; and in the last verse (11:12) indicates that God may well be able to pick His people up from their stumbling; but we will not find out exactly how He does this until the end of the chapter!

Many of Paul's texts are interesting, for example, he quote Elijah in verse 2, who lived at a time when king Ahab of Israel married Queen Jezebel, who re-introduced worship of Ba'al into the life of the northern Kingdom of Israel around 870 BC. Under Jezebel's influence, prophets of God were slaughtered (1 Kings 18:4f.), and although Elijah stood up to her and the prophets of Ba'al (particularly in the famous confrontation on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18), her influence was extensive throughout north and south Israel for several generations. Yet in his loneliest moment, God assured Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-18) that he was not alone. For Paul, this was evidence of the grace of God (11:5) working in Israel; only some had followed their Lord through the difficult times, and Paul believed that in his own day, God's hand was on a chosen few in Israel who would accept Jesus as their Messiah and God's Son. Yet again, Paul used the Old Testament to prove and explain what he saw happening in his own day.

Throughout his ministry, Paul taught that Jesus was rejected by His own people because they stumbled, as foretold by the prophets. To justify this, He used quotes from Isaiah (29:10) and Deuteronomy (29:4) and verses from Psalm 69 (vv 9,10), but these quotes are interesting because they became essential to the early

church and helped them feel secure in their faith (as we will see later in the study). God was indeed faithful despite the stumbling of some of His people.

If we are to follow Paul here, we must remember that he was intent on finding a way of explaining how God would overcome this 'stumbling' and rejection. Towards the end of our passage, Paul makes the astonishing point that God allowed the Gentiles to be saved to make Israel jealous (11:11)!, clearly, God had in mind some plan to bring Israel 'back to the fold' in the future, but this is not explained here. It should be a matter of great rejoicing amongst Christians that God will indeed be reconciled to His people; this is not an addendum to our faith, it is an important part of it.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Is there an elect within an elect?
- The meaning of the remnant
- The meaning of stumbling

Going Deeper

The two main features of our study are the idea that God makes a choice from amongst His own 'chosen' people, and then secondly, a closer look at the reasons given for the blindness and stumbling of the people of Israel. No study of this passage would be complete, however, without accepting that Paul clearly intended to argue that God would one day reward all His people, despite their rejection of the Messiah; something Paul most probably believed would be temporary.

Is there an elect within the elect?

At the height of the success of King David and King Solomon, we gain the impression of a united Kingdom of Israel in which all God's people worshipped the Lord and rejoiced in the construction of the Temple at Jerusalem, for example. After Solomon's reign, Scriptures warn us that the people became less faithful to the Lord, worshipping other gods on 'high places' (see 1 Kings 12:31,32 and 2 Chron 11:15). There is a long history to this rebellion against the Lord from within the ranks of His chosen people, and the writers of Kings and Chronicles certainly blame those who departed from the worship of God as responsible for the Assyrian invasion of the north in 721 BC and the Babylonian invasion of the south in 597 BC.

It was Elijah who was the first prophet to stand against the corrupt and perverting worship of the fertility god who was called 'Ba'al', and because of this he was one of the greatest of prophets. He stood at the end of the tradition of those prophets who were essentially advisors to the ancient Kings; and before the newer prophets such as Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, who arose only a couple of generations later and whose works were written down in the famous prophetic books we have in the Old Testament today. The reason for this rise in the importance of prophecy in Israel was the increasing worldliness and godlessness of both the kings of Israel and Judah, and also the devious religious practices of the people. It is there for all to read, particularly in 2 Kings and in parts of the prophets (for example, Isaiah 36-39, and Jeremiah 27-29).

The meaning of the 'remnant'

However, Paul sought to explain what was going on in a radically new way. By quoting the famous sentence from 1 Kings 19:18 in which God spoke to Elijah about His choice of seven thousand who had not 'offered worship to Ba'al' (11:4), he raised a highly contentious idea, which was that within God's 'elect' nation of Israel, he had chosen a smaller 'remnant' who remained faithful to him. Generally speaking, most Bible translators keep to the convention that God's people as a whole are called 'the elect', but the smaller number who remain faithful are called the 'remnant'. This is done so that we are not confused about what the Bible means; but the two words are essentially the same in Hebrew. Paul insisted that in order for God's people to continue to retain their promises, God had always worked by grace through this smaller number of the faithful, the 'remnant'. Because of the history of God's people and the rise of the 'remnant' idea in the time of the prophets, it was clear, said Paul, that the essential feature of God's work was grace, and the law (which had been given centuries previously). The whole matter fell into his hands as a ready made argument from the Scriptures which supported all he had said previously about the way God worked to achieve His purposes; not by the law, but by grace!

In conclusion, Paul explained the consequences of what he was saying; Israel as a nation had failed to find its Messiah (indeed, it had crucified Him). However, he said that 'The chosen few found it, but the rest were hardened' (11:7). By this, Paul meant that just as God had used a remnant in the past, a remnant of Jewish people had now placed their hope in Jesus, and the hope of the nation rested upon their faithfulness. But what would happen to the rest?

The meaning of stumbling

Paul had already used the metaphor of Israel's stumbling (9:33) to explain what had happened to the nation of Israel, so what was the point of mentioning it once again? Paul clearly wanted to say that this is what happened to those who had not accepted Jesus, but the manner of his explanation is not immediately obvious to us unless we know Scriptures thoroughly. When Paul said 'as it is written' (11:8) he was speaking loosely, and without mentioning a particular Scriptural writer, because he put into one sentence two separate passages, from Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10. These two represented the law and the prophets, but they did more than that. The words used were close to those used by Jesus Himself when he sought to explain why the people he spoke to did not understand his own teaching (see Matt 13:14,15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40, for example).

By using these passages, Paul reminded those to whom he spoke that what was happening was not simply a matter of fulfilling Old Testament law and prophecy, but fulfilling what Jesus had said about Himself. Paul was concerned about the failure of the Israelite people to accept their Messiah, but so was Jesus (see Matt 21:42, 23:37f. etc). This is even clearer in the past quote Paul used from Psalm 69:22,23 (11:9,10). This was a passage used in the early church quite specifically for reference to Jesus' death, and if you read the Psalm (from verses 19 onwards), you will discover that the psalm talks specifically about details of Jesus' death on the Cross.

The last question Paul asks in this passage is whether the Israelite nation have stumbled so badly that there is no possibility of redemption by God's grace (11:11). As before, he says firmly that he does not believe this to be the case, and trusts that God will do something far greater with the situation than can be imagined. What he says implies that the future hope for Israel now lies, paradoxically, with the Gentile people; certainly with those who have received salvation within the Christian Church. Then, using an argument which is characteristic of him, he suggests that, one day, when God finds a way of restoring His relationship with His people, the blessing for everyone will far outweigh the problems created by their rejection (11:12).

Application

The argument Paul raises in the first half of this passage is intriguing. Initially, it suggests that those Jews who become Christians are a 'remnant' of God's people through whom God will fulfil His promises to all His Old Testament people. However, the general principle of a chosen few within the wider chosen people is even more interesting. Perhaps we should recognise that although many claim to be God's people by faith and therefore members of the Church today, perhaps only some of these have indeed responded to the message of grace. Of course, it is almost impossible for us to make judgements about this, or who might indeed be God's chosen within the wider church, this is His call to make, not ours. We live by faith both in God and in our brothers and sisters in Christ, but the final judgment is God's.

This is a difficult subject, but the Bible insists that we address it. It is unwise for us to presume to know God's will and purpose for individuals, but this principle does not simply die with the Old Testament, and it does appear to be the case. Only some of those who call themselves 'Christian' are willing to demonstrate total commitment in their relationship with God, and it is possible that this is simply a reflection of the way God works with people. He accepts all according to their response, but He can only use those who are committed to Him, and there is a difference. All this may explain what lies behind Jesus' famous words 'many are called, but few are chosen' (Matt 22:14); these are often quoted but not often explained.

Lastly, although the future in which the Lord restores all the Jewish People to Himself may well be a long way away in terms of the time we know, should we not look forward to the time when God will re-unite all His chosen people? Whether we live to see this or experience it only in glory, it is a wonderful prospect!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Are there times when you have felt that you alone have understood God's will for some situation, and others have missed the truth? What does this feel like?
2. What do you think of Paul's combination of scriptures to make one 'quote' (11:8)? What does it mean for our interpretation of scripture?
3. Discuss what it means to suggest that the church is made up of both those who are chosen, and those who are called but on the edge of faith.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Throughout this passage there is an implicit warning about falling from grace. Certainly, if the Old Testament people of God fell from grace, then it may be possible that people who call themselves Christian can do the same. These are hard issues for us, but we must face them. There is plenty of evidence that the church can be full of seekers but have few followers, and we need to be more open about this.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Are there things that make you question the existence of God, for example? Or have you had times when it seems that God is so far away, you do not really have confidence in your salvation? These are hard questions to ask, but we should face them and deal with them truthfully.*
- *Pray for those in your church who are seeking faith and feel that they have not yet found the truth of the Gospel. Encourage them to go further and find their Saviour.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, Saviour of all; help us to appreciate the amazing grace within which we stand as Your people, and never presume upon the love You show us. May we never intentionally let You down, and always seek to keep close to Your will and purpose for our lives. AMEN
