

Romans
Israel's Current Spiritual Condition (Part 4)
Romans 11:1-10
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This week, I was reading an article on the National Geographic website about a famous legend; a legend that I think all of us have heard about at one time or another. This is how the article reads:

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans believed that somewhere in the New World there was a place of immense wealth known as El Dorado. When Spanish explorers reached South America in the early 16th century, they heard stories about a tribe, a tribe high in the Andes in what is now Columbia. And the story was told that when a new chieftain rose to power, his rule began with a ceremony at Lake Guatavita, and the new ruler was covered with gold dust, and that gold, along with other precious stones, were thrown into the lake in order to supposedly appease a god that lived there under the lake. The Spaniards started calling this golden chief, El Dorado, which means 'the gilded one.' The ceremony of the gilded man supposedly ended in the late 15th century when El Dorado and its subjects were conquered by another tribe, but the Spaniards and other Europeans had found so much gold among the natives along the continent's northern coast, that they believed there had to be somewhere a store of immense wealth, a city of gold.

And so, the search began, and you're familiar enough, I'm sure, with the legend to know that the search for El Dorado ended up wasting many lives. For example, one famous character from history, Sir Walter Raleigh, his search for the lost city of gold cost him his son's life and his own life in that he was beheaded.

Today, El Dorado has become a kind of metaphor for any relentless, life-destroying search for something that cannot be found because frankly it simply doesn't exist. So, it is really a perfect metaphor for the spiritual search that so many in our world are on. It's the search for a right standing before God, based on our own efforts, based on our own righteousness. And

that search is as destined to failure as the search for the city of gold. However, this search, the search for a right standing before God based on my own works, my own efforts, will not only waste and destroy your life here, but it will destroy your soul.

In Romans 11:7-10, Paul describes how the Jewish search for the spiritual city of El Dorado, the search for self-righteousness and a way to earn one's way into God's favor, set them against God and brought their destruction. The same frankly is true for anyone; anyone who seeks to be right with God by their own efforts.

Now we are studying, as you know, the third great section of Paul's letter to the Romans. It begins in chapter 9 and runs through Chapter 11. I've entitled it "The Gospel Defended." Because in these chapters, Paul poses a question that comes out of the gospel he's preached, and that is, "Why is it that so few of the Jewish people, God's chosen people, believed their Messiah and His gospel? Why is that?"

Paul gives us three answers to that question. In chapter 9, verses 6-29; he gives us the answer of "Divine Election." In chapter 9:30 - chapter 10:21, he gives us the answer of "Human Responsibility." And we find ourselves in chapter 11 and in verses 1-32, his third answer has to do with "God's Faithfulness." He said, "Yes, it's true! Many of the Jewish people, most of them, have not believed in their Messiah or embraced His gospel." But that's not the end of the story. God will remain faithful to His promises to His chosen people. He will continue to treat all the physical descendants of Abraham as His special people, and from them, within them, He will preserve a remnant of true believers. And in the future, all Israel will be saved.

Now Paul develops this idea of God's faithfulness here in chapter 11 in two major sections. In verses 1-10, we see "Israel's Current Spiritual Condition" and beginning in verse 11 and running through verse 32, we will see "Israel's Future Spiritual Salvation." So, their current spiritual condition, first 10 verses, and then beginning of verse 11, their future salvation.

Now in this first section then, Paul explains for us “Israel's Current Spiritual Condition,” and he summarizes their current condition in two ways. First of all, he says that a remnant of the Jewish people is being saved by grace; that's verses 1-6. Paul makes the point in the first six verses, the very fact that a remnant exists, that there are people within the nation of Israel, then and now, who have come to believe in their Messiah, who have believed His gospel proves that God has not abandoned His people. Now we finished those verses last time.

Today, we come to the darker side of Israel's current condition. Because it works this way, if there is a remnant of Jewish people who believe, that necessarily means what? That most have not, that most have not. So a remnant is being saved by grace, but verses 7-10, tells us the other side of Israel's current spiritual condition, the rest are being hardened by sin; the rest are being hardened by sin.

Let's look at it together. Verse 7 begins in a very familiar way to students of Paul, he says, “What then?” This is a common expression of his. What he's about to give us is the logical conclusion of what he's been teaching. “What therefore?” “What do we conclude from what I've been teaching you?” And what follows is remarkable; in fact, verse 7 summarizes all that Paul has taught us thus far in chapters 9 through 11 about Israel. If you look at verse 7, you see that he addresses the issue of election that we saw back in chapter 9; he's got the words ‘elect’ and ‘hardened.’ But verse 7 also summarizes the issue of human responsibility that we saw beginning in chapter 9:30 and running through chapter 10:21, in those words “seeking and not obtained,” because he used those words in that very section. So, he's sort of drawing it all together; and in this summary in verse 7, Paul identifies for us three groups.

The first group is all Israel, all the physical descendants of Abraham. The second group is the elect in Israel, those whom God has chosen. And the third group is the rest, the rest of Israel. Those are the three groups in this summary he identifies for us. Let's see what he says about each of these groups.

First of all, he teaches us that Israel, as a whole, has not obtained righteousness. Israel as a whole, looking at the physical descendants of Abraham as a group, as a whole, they've been, notice what he says, "seeking something."

Now this Greek word for 'seeking' is an interesting word. He takes the normal Greek word for 'seek' and he adds a prefix to it. Now in Greek, when you do that, you are intentionally intensifying it. And so, this is a search, but it's not just any search, this is an intense search; this is an earnest, serious search. And in addition to that, Paul makes it in the present tense in Greek, which has the idea of an ongoing reality. So, this is a constant, aggressive search. What was Israel earnestly, constantly seeking, but has not obtained? Well, we don't have to wonder because Paul makes it clear to us because he uses the same language here that he's already used before. So, go back to chapter 9:30. This helps us understand what he means.

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing that righteousness by law [that's what that expression means] did not arrive at that law. They didn't arrive at the righteousness that they wanted to arrive at. Why? Verse 32. Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone.

What he's saying is, Israel was in this relentless, constant search for righteousness, for a right standing before God, but they never got there; and the reason they never got there is because they misunderstood the gospel. They thought the law was saying, "Obey it and you will earn your way into God's favor." And they didn't see the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ; they stumbled over Him. And so they were pursuing a right standing before God, but they got it all wrong.

Chapter 10:1 says what they needed and in one sense were pursuing was what? Their salvation. They needed to be spiritually rescued. But why didn't they obtain that? Verse 3, "For not knowing about God's righteousness" - the way God had prescribed to be right with Him. They - here it is again - "seeking to establish their own," - righteousness - "they did

not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.” To the way of being right with Him that He prescribed, and the way is in verse 4, “For Christ” - the Messiah, Jesus – “is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

So, they stumbled over Christ and they got the gospel all wrong. So, they earnestly, continually sought to gain a right standing before God; but in spite of that, Paul says in verse 7 of chapter 11, most of the nation never obtained that standing. It’s a sad reality, isn’t it? Most of the chosen people of God didn’t know God. That was true in the first century; it’s still true today.

Only 2 percent of Israel’s population today identify as Christian, 2 percent. And most of that 2 percent are Arabs, not Jewish people. Worldwide, only about 16 percent of Jewish people have come to believe in their Messiah, 16 percent. I thank God that some of them are here in this church. But let’s admit that that low number is surprising. It proves Paul’s point that the nation, as a whole, has not believed, that in spite of an earnest, relentless effort by the whole nation to pursue a right standing before God, they haven’t gotten there because they pursued it the wrong way.

Can I just say, “This is a serious and sober warning for us all?” There is a great danger of pursuing the right goal, being right with God, but doing it the wrong way and never arriving. Israel did; they pursued the right spiritual goal, righteousness or a right standing before God, but they failed to arrive at that goal, most of the Jewish nation. Why? Because they pursued it the wrong way as though it were by works.

Unfortunately, the same thing happens in the Christian church. I am convinced of that; I think there are churches crowded with professing Christians here in North Texas, around our country and around our world, Christian churches crowded with professing Christians who have not obtained the righteousness that they have earnestly pursued. In many cases, that’s because the church they attend teaches a works-based righteousness, a false gospel like first century Judaism. But I think it’s further than that, I think it’s more invasive than that; I think there are many who attend evangelical, Bible teaching churches like ours, who miss the true

gospel. They still earnestly, constantly pursue self-righteousness, being right with God by what they do. Isn't that tragic? I think it's absolutely tragic to belong to a church that teaches the true saving gospel, at the same time, be pursuing a false damning gospel.

You know, that is such a danger. Let me just ask you this morning, and I'm not talking to the person sitting next to you; I'm talking to you and to myself. Ask yourself this question this morning, "Where is my hope of being right with God?" When you stand before God someday, and He says, "Why should I let you into My heaven?" What do you intend to say? If you intend to say anything other than, "I have nothing to offer you but Jesus Christ; His perfect life lived in my place; His substitutionary death in which He satisfied Your justice against my sin and His resurrection which sealed that atonement forever; that is my only hope, and if you won't accept me on those terms, then I am forever lost." If you intend to say anything other than that, if you intend to say that it's based on something in you, something you have done, something you are, something you haven't done, then you are not a Christian. Because the Christian gospel says that your complete and total trust must rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone. That's the only saving gospel.

Go back to Romans, chapter 3, I love the way Paul puts it here; I was meditating on this just this week separate from my message. My heart comes to this text often, Romans 3:24, I don't know, there's maybe one other better summary of the gospel, maybe 2 Corinthians 5:21, but this is a fabulous one. Romans 3:24-25.

[We are] being justified [that is, we are declared right with God] as a gift by His grace [and how can He do that? it's] through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; [and how is that redemption accomplished? Verse 25.] whom God displayed publicly [Jesus] as a propitiation [that is a satisfaction of His wrath against the sins of everyone who would ever believe] in His blood through faith. So that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

That's the gospel; and if your hope is anywhere else, then you have placed your hope in a false gospel. Israel, as a whole, has not obtained righteousness.

Now that brings us to a second group, the elect, in Israel, have obtained righteousness; the elect, in Israel, have obtained righteousness. Paul has already explained for us that only a remnant of the Jewish people would be saved. Look back in chapter 9:27, “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, ‘THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT’ - a small group - ‘THAT WILL BE SAVED.’” He’s already explained that, but why is there only a remnant?

Well, he’s answered that question in two ways. On the human side, it’s because they didn’t believe the gospel; look at chapter 10:16, speaking of the Jewish people, “They did not all heed” - obey - “the good news;” - the gospel - “for Isaiah says, ‘LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT?’” That’s on the human side.

But on the divine side, the reason there’s only a remnant or the reason I should say that there is a remnant, is because of sovereign election. Go back to chapter 9:11.

for though the twins [these two boys] were not yet been born, and not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, “THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER.” Just as it is written “JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.”

God made a choice between those two boys based on nothing in them. Chapter 9:15.

He says to Moses, ‘I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.’” So then it [that is God’s choice] does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but [it’s based solely] on God who has mercy.

Look at verse 18, “So then He” - God - “has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”

Verse 29 reminds us that this isn't a negative thing; the truth is, left to ourselves, there wouldn't be anyone saved. The only reason there is a remnant is because God intervenes in grace. Look at verse 29, "just as Isaiah foretold, 'UNLESS THE LORD OF SABAOTH HAD LEFT TO US A POSTERITY,' - unless He had done it - 'WE WOULD HAVE BECOME LIKE SODOM AND' - we - 'WOULD HAVE RESEMBLED GOMORRAH.'" We would've all been destroyed, but thank God, He intervened, and that's why there's a remnant at all. That's the divine side of why there's only a remnant and Paul continues to stress the divine side of salvation back in our text.

Look at verse 7 again, Romans 11:7, "but those who were chosen obtained it." Literally, the Greek text says, "But the election obtained it." It's a strange expression, and it's the only time the New Testament Paul does it. Usually he would've said, we would have expected him to say, "The elect obtained it." But he says, "The election obtained it." Why? Well, I have to agree with a number of commentators who say that, if he had said, "The elect," then some could have concluded wrongly that God chose us because of something in us; He chose, but maybe it was because I was better than, more intelligent, more spiritual, more savable, whatever. But by saying "The election," looking at us as a group, it says, "No it wasn't because of anything in me." He had this group that He chose, individuals of course, but He chose them based on His gracious choice alone.

Now, Paul began verse 7 by saying that all Israel has not obtained salvation, but now he adds that those whom God chose have obtained salvation. Look back at verse 5, "In the same way then, there has also [just like in Elijah's time, God had the 7,000] come [in the first century, Paul says] to be at the present time a remnant," a small true group of believers among Israel. How did that happen? "According to God's gracious choice." And that's how it happens with all of us. In 1 Thessalonians 1:4, Paul says, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you."

You see, Paul is bringing us back again to his favorite place, back to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The reason that some within the nation of Israel have obtained salvation, the

reason they're a part of that remnant is God's grace, His gracious choice, and the same is true for us. If you sit here this morning as a follower of Jesus Christ, it's not because you were better, smarter, brighter, more savable; it's because of God and His gracious choice. Because if He had left us alone, we would've been like Sodom and Gomorrah. There wouldn't have been one of us standing; it's because He intervened.

There's a third group that Paul identifies in our text, and this is really the focus of this paragraph, the rest of Israel were hardened; the rest of Israel were hardened. That's the point from the middle of verse 7 down through verse 10. Now let me just say to you, this is a hard thing; it's hard for us to hear, pardon the pun. You know it's hard for us to hear about God hardening people. But let's try to listen to the Holy Spirit as He teaches us how God works.

Now, as he explains this, that the rest of Israel were hardened, he begins by stating it and defining it in verse 7. Those who were chosen, obtained it, and the rest were hardened. By the words he uses, he helps us understand what he means.

Let's look at it together. He says when you consider Israel as a nation, when you consider the physical descendants of Abraham, and I shouldn't say a nation, because now when we say Israel, we tend to think of those people gathered in the little land there on the Mediterranean and many of them are Jewish, but there are of course Jewish people all over the world. So, we're talking about the physical descendants of Abraham, all of them. When you consider the physical descendants of Abraham, God chose only a small remnant to save; but the rest, that is all those He didn't choose, Paul says were hardened.

Now you remember that Paul introduced us to this concept of God hardening people back in chapter 9, but here he uses a different Greek word. The Greek word for hardened in this text is often used in secular Greek to describe medical conditions. For example, this word 'harden' is described of the forming of a stone in the bladder. It's also used to describe the calcification that forms where a bone has been broken and heals. But it's often used as it is here in a metaphorical sense; and when you look at the New Testament, how it's used in the New Testament, it's used in two ways in the New Testament. Once, it's used to describe

something that happens to the mind. Listen to 2 Corinthians 3:14, “their minds were hardened.” In context, it has to mean that they had difficulty understanding and comprehending the truth. Their minds were hardened to understand, to grasp.

But most often when this word ‘hard’ or ‘harden’ is used in the New Testament, it’s used to describe the heart, that is, the entirety of the inner man. The heart becomes hard, that is it becomes unreceptive and obstinate, stubborn against God, rebellious against God; that’s a hard heart. So, this word ‘harden’ then, describes both a spiritually blind mind that can’t comprehend the truth and a spiritually stubborn heart, both of which keep people from responding to the gospel message of salvation.

But notice the form of the verb is passive, ‘were hardened.’ Notice it doesn’t tell us in verse 7 who does the hardening. Who does the hardening? Well, it’s clear, in context, it has to be God Himself because notice verse 8; here’s his defense of the “rest were hardened.” Verse 8, “GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR.” And of course, back in chapter 9:18, “[God] hardens whom He desires.” So, God is the one who hardens. It’s something God does; it is a judicial act of God.

In fact, let me give you a definition of this spiritual hardening, “It is a judicial act of God based on the unbelief and rebellion of the sinner.” It is a judicial act of God based on the unbelief and rebellion of the sinner. God hardens the sinner. And by the way, Christian, let me just say this, “It’s not because they deserve to be hardened and we didn’t; we all deserved to be hardened. But God graciously intervened in our case and saved us.” That’s why, by the way, in spite of this hardening, you shouldn’t give up on the people in your life. Keep praying for them; keep sharing the gospel with them because I’ve known people and I know some of you have known people who in their 80’s, at the very end of life or 90’s, have come to faith in Jesus Christ. So, don’t ever give up. But this hardening is something God does.

Now again, this is a hard thing to, pardon the pun, to understand and to grasp and to reconcile with what we know about God. So, here’s the question, how? How does God harden the sinner? This is very important. God does not harden the sinner by actively

producing evil, sin, or unbelief in his heart. In other words, God doesn't make the sinner a sinner. God doesn't introduce something to his heart that is evil that makes him worse. God doesn't do anything like that, because to do so would contradict what we learn about God from many other places including James 1:13; God doesn't tempt people to evil. So, He doesn't actively work evil in the heart of unbelievers.

So how does God harden sinners? God hardens sinners by passing them by and by withholding the softening influences of His Spirit and allowing them to have exactly what they want - their sin, and along with it, what they don't want - its consequences.

Here's how Douglas Moo puts it in his commentary, I like this; he says, "God's hardening permanently binds people in the sin that they have chosen for themselves." God's hardening permanently binds people in the sin that they have chosen for themselves. So, this hardening against God and His Word begins with the sinner hardening his own heart against God and it ends with God judicially hardening the sinner's heart just as he did with Pharaoh. I know these are difficult concepts, so let's ask a question, "Is there anything this is like in our world, that can give us a little more insight into it?"

Well, I think there are a couple of ways to look at it. First of all, I think God's hardening the sinner's heart can be compared to the relationship between the sun and Texas clay. I know that's hard to believe, isn't it, but it's true. When the sun shines on the clay, what happens to the clay? It hardens; it hardens, so that we can legitimately say the sun hardened the clay. But is that really what happened? It's not! It's not really that the sun hardens the clay, but the sun acting on the inherent properties within the clay itself. Why would I say that? Because the same sun that hardens the clay does what to wax? Softens it. So, it's not technically the sun that makes the clay hard; it's the sun acting on those inherent properties that are within the clay. It's the same thing with God hardening a sinner. It's not that God actively does something to the sinner to make him worse; it's that God acts in a way that simply brings out, to greater clarity, the inherent properties of that heart.

Let's take another look at it. God's hardening of the sinner's heart can also be compared to a criminal who is put into prison. You have someone who breaks the law, he's found guilty, he's given a sentence, he is told, "Okay you're going to have to spend so much time in prison because of this thing you've done." And so, he earned prison, but often being in prison only makes a worse criminal; so, we will say sometimes because of his time in jail, he became a hardened criminal. But it wasn't jail that hardened him; it was jail and the circumstances and influences that he encountered there working on properties that were inherent within his own heart.

I did prison ministry for many years, and there were different responses to those circumstances. It softened some, while it hardened others. It wasn't prison; prison didn't harden them, make them a hardened criminal. It was their circumstances working on the inherent properties of their own heart.

In the same way, God hardens the sinner's heart. He doesn't make anyone sin; He doesn't make anyone not believe the gospel; He doesn't make anyone reject the gospel; He simply makes a judicial decision to pass by the sinner and to allow him to be hardened by his own inherent love of sin and rebellion. This is what Hebrews 3 says, Hebrews 3 is talking to Jewish people who have been exposed to the gospel; but in some cases, they haven't really committed themselves to follow Christ, and the writer of Hebrews 3:13 says be careful "so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

You see, when a man doesn't respond, when a person hears the truth like you're hearing it now, when they hear the truth and don't respond to the truth in submission, the more a person hears the truth, the harder he becomes. In fact, let me just say, if you're here this morning and you're not a follower of Jesus Christ and you know that, and you're here maybe with family, maybe, you know, in God's providence, you just happen to be here this morning, a lot of reasons you might be here. But if you know you're not Christian, let me just warn you; this is a serious thing because when you keep hearing the truth of God and you keep refusing to obey it, you keep refusing to submit yourself to it, something is happening in you and to you. You are growing harder to that truth and to that message.

That's why the Bible never says, like a lot of people like think, "Well, yeah, I'll become a Christian someday; yeah, someday when I have chance to do some things I want." The Bible never says that, the Bible always says, "Today, today, unless your heart be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

This hardening of the Jews, because of sin, was a reality in Moses day. I've got a list of references in my notes here; I'm not going to take you back; I think you understand that. The word 'obstinate,' 'stubborn,' 'rebellious,' those words are used often of the Jewish nation in the Old Testament, throughout their history, it was still true in the first century; Jesus described it in Matthew 13:13. Paul encountered it; that's why he's describing it here in these verses, and it continues today. But not just with Jewish people; I want you to see this, with every sinner, Jew or Gentile. Turn to Ephesians, chapter 4. Paul warns us as believers not to keep living like pagans live, and he describes how they live. Look at Ephesians 4:17.

So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, [and here's how they walk, here's how they live] in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, [they don't get it] excluded from the life of God, [no spiritual life] because of this ignorance that is in them, [but what is the root; where does it come from?] because of the hardness of their heart.

They have set themselves against God to do what they want; they have hardened themselves; and to that hardening, Paul tells us, God comes in and makes a judicial decision to allow that hardening to continue and He passes them by.

So, Israel, as a whole, has not obtained righteousness, but the elect within Israel have. But, verse 7 of Romans 11 says, "the rest were hardened." We've seen that, stated and defined by the words Paul uses. But in verses 8-10, it's defended. Paul defends the assertion that the rest of Israel were hardened primarily from three Old Testament texts. And to show that this is what all of the Scripture teaches, Paul chooses passages, as the rabbis often did, from the three traditional Jewish divisions of the Old Testament; from the Law, he chooses

Deuteronomy 29:4; from the Prophets, he chooses Isaiah 29:10, and for what was called the 'Writings,' the third category in Jewish understanding, he chooses Psalm 69:22-23.

Together, these passages show what this hardening we're talking about produces; it produces eyes that can't see the truth and ears that can't really grasp it or understand it, can't hear it.

Let's look at the quotations. The first quotation is in verse 8.

just as it is written,

"GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR,
EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT,
DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY."

Now the first line, Paul actually puts two verses together here in verse 8. And the first line that he quotes is from Isaiah 29:10, "GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR." The Greek word for 'stupor' occurs only here in the New Testament; it refers to what happens when you're drunk. It's a total loss of a sense of reality, a total loss of spiritual sensitivity in this case, like spiritually drunk and not knowing what's really going on. In the context, by the way of Isaiah, it was self-induced. The previous verse says, "You blinded yourselves and you made yourselves drunk." (Paraphrased) And then, "GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR," again, that same relationship.

Now after that first line from Isaiah, the rest of verse 8 here is from Deuteronomy 29:4; it's part of Moses's final instructions before Israel crossed the Jordan to possess the Promised Land. Moses reminded them of God's gracious act of redemption in redeeming them from Egypt, but then he adds this, "God had not given many of them the capacity to understand," and so they didn't understand God's truth. Verse 8, "(He) GAVE THEM EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT." They just didn't understand. It wasn't just true in Moses's day; notice how verse 8 ends, "DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY." This is a continuing reality. Spiritually out of touch, blind and drunk!

There's a second Old Testament quotation, verses 9 and 10:

And David says, “LET THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP, AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM. LET THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT, AND BEND THEIR BACKS FOREVER.”

Now, Paul quotes this from David in Psalm 69, verses 22 and 23. Now, two things you need to know about Psalm 69 to get this. One is, Psalm 69 is one of the Imprecatory Psalms; that is one of the Psalms that calls on God to curse His enemies.

Now let me just hit the pause button say, “Those are not sub-Christian.” David is not filled with bitterness, filled with a spirit of personal revenge, calling on God to vindicate him from his enemies. David, in fact, was one of the least vengeful people you can imagine. Now think about it, think about how he responded to Saul; think about how he responded Absalom; so, this isn't about personal vengeance. The Imprecatory Psalms, and this is a different message for different time, but they are a call for God's justice on those who will not repent and turn to Him, born out of a concern for God's glory and a concern for God's people.

The second thing you need to know about Psalm 69, to get what David is saying here, is it's also one of the Psalms that is most often quoted in the New Testament in reference to our Lord, about 11 times in the New Testament Psalm 69 is quoted in reference to Christ.

So, what's going on in this quote? Well, if you were to go back, and I'm not going to take you there, but in Psalm 69, in its context, David represents the righteous man who is being attacked by his enemies. So, you can see why it's natural that Paul uses it to apply to Christ because He's the perfect righteous man. And Paul uses it here to argue that God will vindicate Jesus Christ and judge His enemies. God is a God of justice and He is not going to let His only Son be treated the way He's been treated forever; He will vindicate Him.

Here's what happens to the enemies of our Lord, look at verse 9, “LET THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP, AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM.” What's that about? Well, the idea is that even the blessings that God has bestowed on them, their table, meaning their spiritual provision, what God has provided for them, that will turn into a curse.

I think Paul means that their spiritual advantages in the case of Israel; those spiritual advantages he talked about back in chapter 9:4-5, all that they benefited from by being God's chosen people, those will turn into a curse; they'll become the source of their spiritual downfall, and that's exactly what happened. God gave them His Law to lead them to the Messiah, to lead them to the gospel of grace, and it became works-righteousness that has become a curse.

Verse 10, “LET THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT,” - again, the total loss of spiritual sensitivity and comprehension - “AND BEND THEIR BACKS FOREVER.” The picture is of backs bent beneath a heavy load of either sin or guilt or grief or maybe all of them. The key word in this quote from the Old Testament, in verses 9 and 10, is the word ‘retribution’; notice that word. It's a word which describes re-payment. Sometimes it's repaying someone for the good they've done you with a reward. But most of the time, this word is used of repaying punishment for evil that's been done; that's the word ‘retribution.’ In other words, this word pertains to justice, so don't miss this point. God's hardening of the sinner is not capricious; it's not unjust, but completely deserved. It is a repayment for their rebellion.

In fact, this is stated clearly back in Lamentations; look at Lamentations, the little book of Lamentations, the 3rd chapter, of course, the famous chapter with “Great is thy faithfulness” and so forth but look at the very end of Lamentations 3. As Jeremiah laments what's happened to his people and the enemies that God has used to destroy the nation, he comes to this conclusion, verse 64. Lamentations 3:64.

You will recompense them, [there's our concept, repay] O LORD, According to the work of their hands. [Now how will God repay them? How will He punish them?] You will give them hardness of heart, Your curse will be on them. You will pursue them in anger and destroy them From under the heavens of the LORD!

What I want you to see is that hardening is not unjust; instead, it is a perfect display of the justice of God. It is exactly what people deserve.

Now, let's admit this is a hard passage, but very quickly, what are the main lessons for us, from this difficult, hard to hear, hard to preach passage? I'm going to call out two lessons. Number one, there is a lesson here in submitting to God's wisdom because Paul's main point is to explain why so few Jewish people have believed, and he says because of their sin, God has chosen to pass them by; and in so doing, to allow them to be increasingly hardened by their sin. Now what's your response to that? Honestly, what's your response as a Christian to that?

Well, let me just say it's okay if you're still struggling to reconcile that with the rest of what you know about God; that's okay. It takes time to work through these things and to see them resolved in the Scripture. What's not okay is to argue with God or to question God or to rewrite the story; that's not okay. Instead, our response should be Paul's response at the end of this chapter; look down at verse 33.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO (can give God advice) BECAME HIS COUNSELOR?

Listen, God doesn't want your advice; He doesn't want you to help Him make this smooth out and be more appealing. What you have to do and what I have to do is, we have to say, "May God be God," and you have to accept His wisdom as superior to yours. Yeah, work it out; continue to work through it; try to understand it, but don't come to it and go, "I don't

like that; I don't think that's good so I'm changing the story.” God doesn’t want you to change the story; He doesn’t want your advice. Let God be God! Out there on the wall in the lobby is a saying that stands for what we, as a church, embrace and it's, “A High View of Scripture,” but the other is “A High View of God!” Let God be God! This is what He has said, so submit to His wisdom.

A second lesson is anticipating God's justice, anticipating God's justice. Let me speak first if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, you're not a follower of Jesus Christ. You understand that Paul's quote here from Psalm 69, it's a sobering reminder to you that God is perfect in His justice, and you will not be the exception. He will, as Paul says in chapter 3 of this letter, He will render to you according to your deeds; He will give you exactly what you deserve. That should be a call to repentance and faith because what you deserve and what I deserve is eternal punishment. God is perfect in His justice.

If you continue as today you've heard the gospel, you've sung the gospel, you've heard me explain the gospel, you've heard the gospel today and if you continue to refuse to repent and believe that gospel, then God, in His justice right now, is allowing your heart to grow harder. And every time you hear and refuse to submit yourself, your heart grows harder and harder against the truth. Don't you dare put off coming to Christ. Today is the day! I plead with you. Listen, God is still gracious; it doesn't matter how hard your heart is; He says in chapter 10:13, “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.” Just humble yourself and throw yourself on His mercy, and He will respond with grace and mercy.

If you're a believer and your heart is often heavy because of the injustice in our world, this passage is a reminder that justice is coming; justice is coming! I don't know about you, but I read things every day in the news and see them and hear about them that just make me angry because people are sinning so profoundly and grossly against other people. It troubles our hearts, doesn't it? But listen, you don't have to worry; God is on His throne, and the foundation of His throne, the psalmist says is justice; justice is coming.

I've been listening to a CD that was given to me that I really love by Andrew Peterson. There's a song on there about God's justice; there aren't many songs about God's justice. But this one I love. Listen to these words:

If a thief had come to plunder
when the children were alone
If he ravaged every daughter
and murdered every son.
Would not the Father see this?
Would not His anger burn?
Would He not repay the tyrant,
in the day of His return?
Await, await, the day of His return.

Listen, justice is coming! So, it's okay to hope in that justice, to pray for that justice as David did, and as Paul repeats here in Romans, chapter 11. And in the meantime, to pray that God would show mercy and grace on those like us who only deserve His justice.

Let's pray together. Father, thank You for this very difficult passage. Lord, help us to humble ourselves before Your Revelation. Lord, help us to grapple with it, to seek to understand it, to struggle, to reconcile it with the rest of what we know about You, but Father, don't let us question You; don't let us seek to be Your counselor. Oh, God, help all of us who truly believe You and believe Your Word to submit ourselves to Your wisdom and to let You be God. Help us to hold to a high view of You in the truest sense.

Father, I pray for those who are here this morning who are not in Christ. Lord, help them to see the reality of their condition; help them to see the danger of their circumstance; that the more they hear and don't submit themselves to Your truth, the harder their hearts become; they harden themselves against You, and You will begin to judicially harden them as well, to leave them to their sin and rebellion so that it only grows worse. Oh, God, don't let anyone here today arrive at a place where they are completely alienated from Your grace.

Lord, may they pursue You today, may they throw themselves on Your mercy today and find in Christ forgiveness. We pray in His name, Amen.