

God Has Not Canceled His Promises to Israel —part 1 His Setting Aside of Israel Is Partial

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. 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 Thy prophets, they have torn down Thine 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.” In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; 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.” 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.” (11:1–10)

No message of Scripture is clearer or repeated more often than the unqualified declaration that God can be trusted, that He is the very source and measure of truth. By definition, His divine Word is absolutely trustworthy. Whatever He says is true and whatever He promises comes to pass.

Shortly before his death, Joshua testified to Israel, “Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the Lord your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed” (Josh. 23:14; cf. 21:45). David praised and exalted the Lord as “the God of Truth” (Ps. 31:5). After Solomon prayed before the altar on behalf of his people, “he stood and blessed all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice, saying, ‘Blessed be the Lord, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise, which He promised through Moses His servant’” (1 Kings 8:55–56).

In His high priestly prayer, Jesus prayed to His Father on behalf of His followers, “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). Paul reminded Titus that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), and the writer of Hebrews declares that “He [God] who

promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23; cf. 6:17–18). God’s promises never fail because everything He says is wholly true, without a trace of error.

No passage of Scripture articulates God’s truthfulness and trustworthiness more eloquently than chapters 9–11 of Romans. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, Paul begins this remarkable section on the nation of Israel with the declaration that it is “Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises” (Rom. 9:4).

God had made clear and specific promises to His chosen nation Israel. Some of those promises were conditional, dependent on Israel’s obedience. But His greatest promises to His chosen people were unconditional and therefore were grounded solely in God’s righteous integrity. Were God to fail in those promises, He would be less than righteous and just. He would be what God cannot be.

Contrary to what some sincere Christians maintain, God cannot be finished with the nation of Israel—for the obvious reason that all of His promises to her have not yet been fulfilled. If God were through with His chosen nation, His Word would be false and His integrity discredited. Among those who most strongly insist that God is through with the nation of Israel are those whose theology is commonly referred to as covenant theology. It is ironic that, because of a distorted view of Israel, covenant theology cannot escape the implication that God is not faithful in fully honoring His covenants.

God’s first covenant with Israel was through Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, who became the nation of Israel. Just before He commanded Abraham to proceed from Haran to Canaan, God promised, “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2–3). After Abraham (then called Abram) entered Canaan, “The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, ‘Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered’”(Gen. 13:14–16). Some years later, God reiterated the promise, saying, “‘Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’”(Gen. 15:5).

On that occasion God instructed Abraham to cut certain prescribed animals in half, laying the two parts opposite each other. Except as an observer, Abraham did not participate in the confirmation of that covenant. Only the Lord passed between the pieces of the animals, signifying that He alone had dictated and would fulfill the covenant (see Gen. 15:8–21).

Although that covenant was for the benefit of Abraham and his descendants, and ultimately for the blessing of the entire earth, the terms of the covenant were unconditional, and it was sworn to and affirmed *by God with Himself*. He made an inviolable oath with Himself to keep His promises to Abraham. However faithful Abraham or his Israelite descendants might be, God would fulfill the covenant in every detail. This was a divine covenant founded on God’s sovereign election of Israel as His chosen people (see Heb. 6:13–20).

Because of God's promises to Abraham and to his descendants through Isaac, the son of promise, the nation of Israel has always been and always will be divinely preserved. Otherwise God could not fulfill His irrevocable promises to her. He caused Israel to outlast all the nations who were contemporary with her, and He still preserves her today. In 1948 He brought her back into her own land as an independent and recognized state among the nations of the world.

God's character and integrity, His trustworthiness and faithfulness depend on His continued preservation of Israel. God has obligated Himself to ultimately redeem the nation of Israel and to establish her as a purified and glorious kingdom above all others in the world.

God has promised to bless all the peoples of the world through Abraham and his descendants, and the fulfillment of that promise culminated in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. He arose from Israel, but the redemption He offered was to Jew and Gentile alike. Early in His ministry, Jesus declared that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Near the opening of this epistle, Paul assures his readers that "the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek [Gentile]" (Rom. 1:16).

But because the Jews as a nation rejected their Messiah, God temporarily set that nation aside "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). At that time, with unfailing certainty, "all Israel will be saved" (v. 26). In addition to bringing His chosen people to salvation, God will fulfill His promises to restore her own kingdom in her own land, which will become a land of eternal blessing and peace.

Above all, God promised

"a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (Jer. 31:31-33)

The Jews of Old Testament times understood that those divine promises would be fulfilled literally. But when their Messiah came, spiritual blindness prevented them from recognizing Him. "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). When Pilate mockingly asked the Jewish crowd, "Shall I crucify your King?" the chief priests, speaking for all of apostate Israel, declared with hypocritical vehemence, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15).

Paul knew that most Jews were confused about Israel's true destiny in regard to her Messiah. They reasoned that, because Israel was God's chosen nation, it would be inconceivable that she would spurn her own Messiah, much less put Him to death. Regardless of how disobedient, rebellious, and spiritually blind Israel might become, surely she could not fail to recognize and receive her long-awaited Deliverer. Even if ordinary Jews failed to acknowledge and honor Him, the religious leaders were certain that they themselves could never make such an egregious error.

But Jesus prophesied that rejection in the parable of “a certain nobleman [who] went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return.” Just as the citizens of that country declared, “We do not want this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:12–14), so the nation of Israel refused the reign of Jesus Christ over them. Shortly after Pentecost, Peter reminded his fellow Jews of that tragic rejection: “You disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses” (Acts 3:15).

Because Israel “stumbled over the stumbling stone,” Jesus Christ, and would not believe in Him (Rom. 9:32–33), because Israel did not know “about God’s righteousness, and [sought] to establish their own” (10:3), and because God had continually, “all the day long, . . . stretched out [His] hands to a disobedient and obstinate people” (10:21) who rejected Him, would not God be fully justified in forever rejecting them?

In itself, that wickedness would more than deserve God’s complete and permanent condemnation. Paul makes clear, however, that Israel’s rejection of Christ did not catch God by surprise but was, in fact, an integral part of His eternal plan of redemption. He makes equally clear that, despite its being part of that plan, Israel’s rejection of Christ was by her own rebellious choice, for which the Lord holds her fully accountable.

Once again we see the remarkable and seemingly irreconcilable association of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. It is perfectly evident from history as well as from Scripture that Israel rejected Jesus Christ and the gospel of salvation He offered. Scripture also makes certain that God consequently set His ancient and beloved people aside.

But Paul knew that neither Jew nor Gentile would place his trust in a God who did not keep His promises. And God’s unqualified promises to Israel included the assurance that He would never completely forsake her. Because God’s Word is grounded in His divine integrity and faithfulness, even His chosen people’s rejection and crucifixion of His Son could not abrogate the ultimate fulfillment of His promises to them. It is that glorious truth that Paul explains and clarifies in Romans 11.

The apostle begins by stating the truth in the form of a rhetorical question, a question reflecting the confusion and misunderstanding he must have dealt with countless times: **I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He?**

Rejected is from *ἔρριπτο* which means to thrust away. In the New Testament this verb is always used in the middle voice, indicating a thrusting away from oneself. Paul is therefore not asking whether or not God has refused to *receive* His people to Himself but whether or not He has thrust away from Himself the people He long ago received as His own.

Paul immediately answers his own question, declaring what should have been obvious to his believing readers. For those who know God’s character and understand His promises to Israel, there could be but one answer: **May it never be!** Impossible! That is the succinct thrust of Romans 11—It is totally inconceivable that God could renege on His unconditional promises to Israel.

The phrase *ἄρα οὐκ ἔστιν* (**May it never be!**) was the strongest negative in the Greek language, translated idiomatically in the King James Version as “God forbid.” Except for its use in one of Jesus’ parables (Luke 20:16), the expression is used elsewhere in the New Testament only by Paul, who employs it fourteen times, ten times in Romans alone. As

here, he employed it almost exclusively to repudiate an anticipated misunderstanding by his readers (see, e.g., Rom. 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 1 Cor. 6:15; Gal. 2:17).

Despite Israel's being "disobedient and obstinate" (Rom. 10:21), Scripture is replete with the Lord's promises never to forsake His chosen people. "The Lord will not abandon His people on account of His great name, because the Lord has been pleased to make you a people for Himself" (1 Sam. 12:22). It is God's faithfulness to Israel that guarantees her ultimate redemption and restoration.

Through the psalmist the Lord declared of Israel,

If they violate My statutes, and do not keep My commandments, then I will visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. But I will not break off My lovingkindness from him, nor deal falsely in My faithfulness. My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David. His descendants shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful. (Ps. 89:31–37)

Through another psalmist God promised that "the Lord will not abandon His people, nor will He forsake His inheritance" (Ps. 94:14). In spite of Israel's continued unfaithfulness, God "looked upon their distress, when He heard their cry; and He remembered His covenant for their sake, and relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness" (Ps. 106:44–45). God's grace always surpasses His people's sin.

Psalm 105 is devoted entirely to thanking and praising God for His unalterable and permanent covenant relationship with Israel. "He has remembered His covenant forever," the writer declares, "the word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac. Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant" (Ps. 105:8–10).

After Israel returned from seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the Levites spoke to the Lord on behalf of a now penitent nation, acknowledging before Him the people's repeated cycles of going from wickedness to penitence to forgiveness to restoration and then reverting again to wickedness:

They became disobedient and rebelled against Thee, and cast Thy law behind their backs and killed Thy prophets who had admonished them so that they might return to Thee, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore Thou didst deliver them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them, but when they cried to Thee in the time of their distress, Thou didst hear from heaven, and according to Thy great compassion Thou didst give them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors. (Neh. 9:26–27; cf. 28–30)

"Nevertheless, in Thy great compassion, Thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them," the Levites continued to pray, "for Thou art a gracious and compassionate God" (9:31). Although Israel deserved only God's damnation, His own promises to her would not permit it, because "the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, . . . dost keep covenant and lovingkindness" (v. 32).

Through Jeremiah, the Lord assured His people:

“Fear not, O Jacob My servant,” declares the Lord, “and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for behold, I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. And Jacob shall return, and shall be quiet and at ease, and no one shall make him afraid. For I am with you,” declares the Lord, “to save you; for I will destroy completely all the nations where I have scattered you, only I will not destroy you completely.” . . . He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock. (Jer. 30:10–11; 31:10)

Because of His covenant promises to Israel, that nation was never, and can never be, completely cast aside by the Lord.

In light of that truth, Paul affirms that God’s present setting aside of Israel is only partial (11:1–10). He does so by pointing to himself as a believing Jew (v. 1*b*), by pointing to the believing remnant whom God has always preserved in Israel (vv. 2–7*a*), and by pointing to God’s revelation about unbelieving Israelites whose hearts are hardened to His grace (vv. 7*b*–10).

The Truth About the Writer

For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin (11:1*b*)

The first proof that God had not rejected His chosen people was that Paul, not only a believer in Christ but also an apostle (1:1), was himself **an Israelite**.

Although Paul does not mention it here, the vast majority of early Christians were Jews. It was for the very reason that so many of his fellow Jews had turned to Jesus as their Messiah that Paul, under his former name of Saul, had once fiercely persecuted the church (Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–2). Before his conversion, he had been the most fanatical Christ-hating and Christian-hating Jew in Israel. If such a Christ rejecting Jew as himself could be brought to saving faith, the gospel had power to save *any* Jew.

More than that, however, Paul’s own conversion made it obvious that God could not possibly have rejected all Israel. He was living proof that, just as God’s promises to Israel do not include all individual Jews, so his judgment and rejection of Israel do not include all individual Jews. Paul would hardly devote the rest of his life, and many times risk his life, to preach a gospel from which he himself was excluded.

Paul was not a proselyte to Judaism, but was a Jew by birth, a genuine **Israelite, a descendent of Abraham**. Probably speaking of Judaizers, who were among the “false apostles, deceitful workers, [who were] disguising themselves as apostles of Christ,” Paul asked the Corinthians, “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I” (2 Cor. 11:13, 22).

Paul not only was a **descendent of Abraham** but a member **of the tribe of Benjamin**, “one of the most favoured tribes” of Israel according to theologian Charles Hodge. “Judah and Benjamin, especially after the exile, were the chief representatives of the theocratical people” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950; orig. revised ed., 1886], p. 353).

Paul again mentioned that distinction in his letter to the church at Philippi, declaring, “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Phil. 3:4–6). But being **of the tribe of Benjamin** was

only an earthly distinction, which, like the others he names here, he counted as “loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (v. 8).