



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Romans 11:7-10

"National Numbness – the Bequest of God"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The general theme of our series of messages, which we began in our last talk, is The Apostle Paul and the Purpose of the Ages, or to put it in popular terms "What is God Doing Now?" We expect to complete our studies, with Romans 11 as the basic text, in seven messages. The second of the messages to be given today is entitled "National Numbness – the Bequest of God." And if you're interested in following along with your Bibles right by your side, turn with me to Romans chapter 11. "National numbness – the Bequest of God."

Without equivocation, the Bible affirms three important truths regarding the nation Israel. First, as Balaam in his prophecies so eloquently declared under the sovereign control of God, Israel possesses a certain preeminence among the nations. And second, Israel enjoys a certain separateness from the nations. It is a people that shall dwell alone. And finally, Israel has the promise of an everlasting persistence before God through covenantal grace, as Jeremiah so eloquently prophesies in Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 31 through verse 37. These are incontrovertible truths and that is why Paul had to write Romans 9 through 11.

After the marvelous exposition of God's glorious good news in chapters 1 through 8, one might have asked "Where is Israel? What is her place in this display of grace?" The

propounder of the questions would know that no exposition of divine truth can possess credibility without giving Israel her proper place, a place demanded by the ancient promises to her forefather Abraham.

"Why is Israel missing from your construction of God's salvation, Paul?" one might ask. Do you believe that Israel has been, by her disobedience, cut off like an old worn out garment? Almost all readers of the Bible know the basic answer to that question. Paul alluded to it earlier in chapter 3 of his book to the Romans. God cannot cast off his people, for his faithfulness to unconditional promises is at stake, ultimately his divine honor. In fact, the apostle has said there exists at the present time a remnant of believing Israelites, including Paul, left by God himself in grace for himself. They have received the benefits of the promises and stand as evidence of the fact that God has not cast off his people.

But what of the mass of Israelites, the nation, the "disobedient and gainsaying people," as he describes them in chapter 10 and verse 21? The picture darkens. They, it is true, have failed the test of faith obedience. To use Paul's own illustration of the olive tree, which he expounds a few sentences on, they are branches that have been broken off, severed from the life of the patriarchal promises. And worse, as we shall see shortly, they have been hardened in disciplinary judgment.

The section of Romans 11 before us in this study, then, becomes important for the light it throws on Israel's past and present. It touches directly upon the trials and tensions of the Jewish people, whether in the state of Israel or scattered throughout God's world. And it is the considered opinion of many biblical students that there is no solution to Israel's troubles other than that suggested by Moses centuries ago in Leviticus chapter 26 verse 40 through verse 42 where Moses writes,

"If they confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass (Is that singular important?) which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked

contrary unto me; And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land."

And when that time does come, and it will, then the earth shall echo Moses' final blessing of the tribes, "Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the LORD" Deuteronomy 33:29.

Well now, in our last study we looked at Romans chapter 11 verse 1 through verse 6. And we turn to the Pauline interrogation which begins the 7th verse. The apostle writes, "What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded." So the apostle has answered his rhetorical question "Has God cast away his people" by saying no, there is a remnant.

He now turns to consider the logical conclusion of the discussion to this point. The nation stands in a state of unbelief. But in the general spiritual corruption, sovereign grace has created a genuine remnant. Paul's opening words in verse 7 may be expanded into "What then shall we say to the present situation?"

And now beginning with the middle of the 7th verse, and through the end of that verse, the apostle explains. He explains first the failure of the mass of the nation. His answer is clear. Viewed from the human side, what Israel seeks, namely a righteousness before God, she has failed to attain. The present tense in the word "seeketh" is a vivid picture of the ceaseless and noble, although misdirected, efforts of Israel after a right standing before God.

Our society today does not seem in the least concerned about their relationship with God. And thus, the Israel of Paul's day stands or stood in a much better situation

before the Lord God. At least they were seeking after a righteous standing, although in the wrong way.

Now the success of the remnant is alluded to by the apostle. On the other hand, the election, he says, has obtained that status before God. And it is clear that the apostle emphasizes the divine grace in this possession of the righteousness. He calls those who possess it "the election," that is, they have their righteousness by divine selection, further defined in verse 5 as "the election of grace." Thus, God has not cast away his people.

There are several things to note here. In the first place, it's sometimes said that God elects only to service and not to salvation. Here, to the contrary, the election has as its goal the possession of the righteousness of God. One only has to turn to a passage like 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 13 and verse 14 to see the error of saying that election has as its goal only service, for there the apostle plainly speaks about believers as being elected unto salvation.

A second thing to note is the use of the term "Israel" here. It quite clearly shows that the apostle has the mass of the people of Israel, the nation, in mind. In the case of the election, the term that he uses of the remnant, he has in mind that smaller particular body of believers in the nation. In other words, the election is not simply national; it is also individual, national election.

John Murray makes the interesting comment on Paul's use of the abstract "the election" rather than the concrete expression "the elect". He says, "When Paul says the election obtain it, he means the elect. But he uses the abstract noun in order to lay stress on the idea rather than on the individuals and thus, accentuates the action of God as the reason."

I think that's right. To speak of the election lays stress upon what God has done. To speak of the elect might turn the attention of the reader to the individuals. And election is ultimately the work of the Lord God.

Now the apostle speaks of the judgment of the mass at the end of the 7th verse. Viewed from the divine side, however, something else must be said. Paul writes, "The rest were hardened." The rest are those remaining after the subtraction of the chosen remnant. They have been hardened as a penal judgment for unbelief.

There is some question over the word rendered "were blinded." The verb, derived from a word referring to a callus or a stone, is used metaphorically in the New Testament of the heart becoming hardened or calloused. One thinks of verse 25 in this very text where the noun is found again.

In this context, however, it may have the force of "were blinded" as the Authorized Version renders it. The following citations with their references to the eyes give some support to this. But at any rate, the word relates at least to the will and may also relate to the mind.

The truth that men may be hardened spiritually is a stumbling block to the natural man today. He resists both the biblical view of man and the biblical view of the divine sovereignty. That attitude we must avoid. And if puzzled or perplexed about God's right to harden and also to exercise mercy, let us bow before Scripture and await God's future clarification of the mystery.

Two mistakes have sometimes been made in handling the puzzling expression "the rest were hardened." Without proper consideration of the context, some have explained the words as 'they hardened themselves.' As one of the leading interpreters of Romans says, "that misinterpretation can easily lead to a hard and unbrotherly attitude to the Jews on the part of Christians." Luther, for example, often expatiated on the hardening of the Jewish heart, forgetting that the Gentile heart is also naturally rebellious as well. Paul makes that very plain in his writings.

Others have been guilty of a second mistake. They have stressed the passive voice incorrectly, as if Paul were trying to avoid any suggestion that God performed the hardening. In fact, it is more likely that the passive is used simply to avoid the use of the

divine name, for the Jews customarily tried to avoid the use of the divine name. A simple reading of the following verse will pointedly reveal the error, for there we read,

"According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber."

Divine retribution endorsed by our Lord himself in his ministry here on the earth cannot be wrenched from holy Scripture. One only has to turn to Matthew chapter 13, Mark chapter 4 and John chapter 12 in order to see that plainly.

In the discussion of such things, we often forget an important truth. No one deserves the grace and mercy of God. God would be perfectly just in condemning all of us. The fact that he has graciously rescued his people is no basis for the charge of unfairness. It is a thrilling magnification of his love and grace.

There is no evidence anywhere in Scripture that God prevents a seeking soul from coming to a saving knowledge of him. On the other hand, there is every indication that when one does come to him and is saved, it is traceable to the efficacious drawing of the Father. Jesus said, "No man can come unto me except the Father which hath sent me draw him." We rest, I rest, in these magnificent truths.

Now Paul turns to illustrate his point. And speaking of course primarily to individuals, if not Jewish believers, at least strongly influenced by Jewish believers and by the Jewish Scriptures, he turns to the Old Testament and gives illustrations from the word of God to support his particular points that he's making. Verses 8 through 10 of Romans 11 give his illustrations and first from the law and the prophets. In order to nail down his argument and its conclusion, the apostle turns to specific passages, then, from Scripture, in this case, citations from the law, the prophets and the writings, the threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures. And they settle the matters for individuals who listen to the word of God. The quotations are freely woven together, and they provide a solemn and compelling climax to the section.

The citation in verse 8 comes primarily from Deuteronomy chapter 29 and verse 4. But a phrase is also borrowed from Isaiah chapter 29 and verse 10. The borrowed phrase

is an important one. It's the phrase "the spirit of slumber". The apostle uses the passages in an illustrative, typical manner finding a parallel between the Israel of Moses' day and his day. And Moses, in the passage from which Paul cites, reflects on the nation's history and the exodus, and he traces their failure to the Lord's failure in giving them a heart to perceive, "eye to see and ears to hear" up to his, that is, Moses' day. In typical Hebrew fashion, he traces all their experiences to the Lord as the ultimate cause of everything. The words are intended to be an appeal to the nation to be faithful to the covenant. The condition of the people is the result of God's punitive inflictions.

Paul emphasizes this since he modifies Moses' negative form of statement into a positive expression of hardening. Instead of saying that God has failed to do this, Paul writes "God has given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear; unto this day." The phrase from Isaiah 29:10, "spirit of slumber" or stupor is also found in a context of divine judgment upon the nation. Desiring alliances with the heathen nations rather than with the Lord God, Israel shall fall under a divinely imposed deep sleep, Isaiah points out, utterly unmoved by the glorious Messianic promises given to them.

Ridderbos has said it well. "Now comes the announcement of the awesome judgment that strikes at this culpable ignorance, rooted as it is in unbelief. They will not, therefore, they shall not understand. The word of God that they have rejected is still effective, if not in saving them, then in hardening them. The words, "Be stunned and amazed (he refers to Isaiah chapter 29 and verse 9 in this context) allude to the way they have often stared dumbly at Isaiah as though when he preached he had uttered incomprehensible things in their presence."

You know, every one of us who preaches the word of God has had that experience. We look out on an audience, and we say sometimes, giving the marvelous words of Scripture themselves, the great truths of that word of God, and it seems as if the

audience stares back just as Isaiah's audience did, dumbly and without comprehension and without interest in the things of the word of God.

So in Isaiah's day and so in Paul's day, the apostle infers they also stand and stare with the astonishment of incomprehension at the word of God and the work of God in which his word goes into fulfillment. The effect of God's message upon the people, then, is that of men suddenly awakened from sleep and unable to read a message thrust into their hands. Why? They have no personal knowledge of the Lord they profess to honor.

Hodge is right. It's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The strokes of his justice blind, bewilder and harden the soul." Modern Israel testifies to that. But a large section of professing Christianity also testifies to the same thing.

Well, having given an illustration from the law and the prophets, the apostle turns in verse 9 and verse 10 of Romans 11 to an illustration from the writings. The apostle concludes the section with a citation from this third division of the Old Testament, the writings, which includes the Psalms. The citation is from Psalms 69:22 and 23. The psalm itself is a Messianic one, and in fact, next to Psalm 22 and Psalm 110, it's the most frequently cited one in the New Testament. It is an imprecatory one, that is, a psalm in which the author, in this case David, prays that God will bring condemnation and retribution upon his enemies, for he has been unjustly the object of their murderous ill will and slander.

Paul, as the other New Testament commentators, regards the psalm as a typical one, David's experiences finding their final fulfillment in the experiences of David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ. David's greater son, Christ, bore his suffering ultimately from Judas and his partners in crime, and thus, it is not surprising that Peter cites the psalm also and refers it to Judas in Acts chapter 1.

Paul follows the same methodology here. He sees in David's enemies reflections of the generation that crucified the Messiah and continues on into the apostolic age.



David's opponents live on in Paul's day. And Paul responds as David did in calling down retribution upon them.

Sometimes Bible students try to make the point that the God of the Old Testament, on the basis of such passages in the imprecatory psalms, is a cruel and vengeful deity and not the God of love found in the New Testament. Paul's citation indicates that the moral standards of the God of the Old Testament are not outdated standards of a warlike and vicious God but simply express the mind of a just and holy God toward his willful enemies. The kind of love that people speak about today when they talk about the love of God is often nothing more than sentimentality and does not in any way have anything to do with the law of God. These two things are in harmony, the law of God and the love of God. And we do not understand either one if we do not pay attention to the other.

Several things emerge here. First, the figure of the table that is alluded to where we read "David said, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap." That may be inclusive of their possession of the law in which they have delighted, yet in a mistaken fashion. And perhaps also, David alludes to the Messianic promises. Their misuse of the law, by trying to make it a way of salvation, and their neglect of the promises as the true means of salvation, Paul would have become a snare to them as a recompense for their unbelief.

And second, the Authorized Version's word "always" is probably better rendered by "continually," where we read in verse 10, "and bow down their back always," "Bow down their back continually." The bowing down is to be sustained and continuous, but it will not go on forever. The lifting of the national judgment lies in the future, for retribution is not God's last word for Israel as we will see in the verses that follow.

Well, let me say a few things by way of conclusion. Many truths find illustration in this magnificent section from Romans 11, difficult and hard in many ways, but yet wonderful in others. A man is free to accept or reject the gospel, but if he rejects it, he still sustains a relation to the rejected savior. The rejected message abides and the

rejected savior becomes a stumbling stone against which the rejector breaks himself. Just as the smallest particle of light falling on unexposed film produces a chemical change that can never be undone, so the rejection of Christ leaves an ineffaceable mark on the spirit of a man.

Men do not merely neglect the gospel. There is always a response. And if rejection takes place, the man is always a worse man after having heard. Jesus' words are solemnly true, "Whosoever falls on this stone," he alludes to himself and his work "shall be broken." As McClaren says somewhere, "The gospel once heard is always the gospel which has been heard." And those who turn from our Lord only signify that they have loved darkness rather than light.

All the heretics of the ages know the truth now. Just as the king of Babylon was greeted in Hades by the shades there with the words, "Ah, are ye also become weak as we? Art thou also become like one of us?", so have all the heretics of the past been greeted by their fellow pagans at their deaths. From Cain through Pharaoh, Balaam, Balak, Ahab, Arius, Sabelius, Socinus and other, and the deniers of the full deity of Christ today, and the deniers of his penal substitutionary atonement, they have all gone and shall go to the tomb to know the tragedy of a Christ-rejecting life.

Oh, the danger of becoming gospel-hardened. "Let their table be made a snare," David said of the unbelieving Israelites of his day, who nevertheless were still offering the sacrifices and entering the temple. That may happen in our evangelical churches, and our services, and our observances of the ordinances may become a snare to us if we are not exercised by them giving them the attention of our hearts. And I must say, I'm persuaded that this often happens in our churches today.

It was said of those around the cross, "sitting down they watched him there." In a sense, the watch continues as Christ is preached. The four soldiers indifferently cast lots for his garment. The Sadducees and the Pharisees, the intellectual and the religious, blasphemed him. The women and the crowds sincerely pitied him, but did not really

understand. Only the dying thief was touched by the despair of his lost condition, crying out, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." Even the saints fled out of fear and anxiety provoking the question, the existential question if I may put it that way, my friend listening to me, "What is our attitude?" What is your attitude? What is mine?

May God move all who listen to these words and who later read this study to cry out with the thief in the despair of self-salvation, "Lord, remember me in grace and save me by Thy marvelous sacrifice."

The third of the messages to be given next week is entitled "God's Purpose in Israel's Fall." I hope you'll be listening then. We'll see you then.