

Chapter 51

Can Jews Be Saved?

(Romans 11:1–10)

Paul is answering difficulties concerning Israel's national rejection of Jesus. Has God been unfaithful? No, not all are God's true Israel by physical descent (9:6–29). Israel 'stumbled' because of their unbelief (9:30–10:21). Now a third question: is it the case that Jews cannot be God's people any longer?

1. **Is it now impossible for a Jew to be saved?** Paul answers the question. He himself is a Jew and he is saved! ¹*For I myself also am an Israelite, descending from the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.* He is the proof himself that God has not **totally** abandoned Israel. ²*God has not cast off his people* – the entire nation of Israel – *whom he foreknew.* Paul reminds us of a time when only a small **remnant** of Jews were saved. *Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleaded with God against Israel? ³'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have torn down your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life'* [he is referring to 1 Kings 19:14]. ⁴*But what is the divine response to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'* ⁵*In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's election of grace. ⁶And if it is grace, it is no longer from works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.* At the time of Elijah only a small number of believers were to be found.

2. Where there is a ‘remnant’ of believers, there is hope for the future. In Elijah’s day it seemed that there was no hope of the people of God ever recovering. The prophets of Baal were everywhere! But the nation continued and there was a remnant of true believers. It was entirely of God’s grace. They did not give themselves faith or save themselves. They were God’s elect at a time when most were turning away from the God of their fathers. It was the same in Paul’s day. Most Jews at the time of Christ rejected their Saviour, but thousands of gentiles came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of Israel. It is still true, and it is a sign that God has plans for the future of Israel.

3. Israel has been temporarily hardened.

⁷What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained. The elect obtained it and the rest were hardened, ⁸as it is written:

*⁸‘God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.’*

⁹And David says,

*‘Let their table become a snare and a trap,
and a stumbling block and a retribution to them.*

*¹⁰Let their eyes be darkened so that they do not see,
and bend their backs continually.’*

God ‘hardened’ Israel. He handed them over to their own unbelief. It does not mean that God **created** any hardness or forced them to sin. He simply allowed the hardness of their hearts to take its natural course.

There is nothing of personal vindictiveness in the lines taken from the psalms of David. One only has to consider the life of David to see that one thing that God taught him was to avoid

personal vindictiveness. David is speaking under direct inspiration, and is passing on God's judgement. No ordinary person has the right to speak in this way, but God has the right to pass judgement upon those who hate his kingdom and his people. David is led to speak on behalf of God in announcing the anger of God against sin. So Paul feels free to quote Psalm 69. The hardening of Israel in the time of Jesus is in line with David's predictive prayer for the judgement of God's enemies in Israel.

1. **When God is angry, blessings turn around to become a curse.** 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and retribution . . .' The picture is of a well-laid prosperous feast. But the very prosperity of the household turns out to be a curse. When God is hardening our hearts prosperity tends to make us hard and careless. Whole communities develop a lifestyle in which there is scarcely any room for the blessing of God. Prosperity which ought to be a blessing turns around and actually exercises a destructive influence in the lives of the people who are rejecting God's will.

2. **When God is angry, spiritual blindness sets in.** David prayed: 'Let their eyes be darkened so that they do not see . . .' Those who do not wish to see become even less able to see.

3. **When God is angry, all energy is lost.** David prayed: 'and bend their backs continually'. It is a picture of an elderly person with faculties weakened and with vigour and energy lost. The old person is decrepit and crippled, with bent back and all ability to care for himself gone. It is a picture of what Israel became once God had allowed the nation to fall into hardness and spiritual blindness. Israel was like an infirm elderly person with bent back. The kingdom of God was taken from them (see Matthew 21:42–43; see also 23:38 and Acts 7:60, esp. 51–53). This abandonment into spiritual apathy and powerlessness is the judgement of God. For the moment Israel has been left in such a condition. It was not permanent but it was God's temporary judgement against the sin of unbelief.