
Chosen by Grace (Romans 11:1-10)

10/29/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



“I don’t know how I’d get by without my faith. I don’t know how unbelievers do it!” I’ve heard people say that quite a lot. Honestly, in some ways, I think unbelievers get by pretty much the same way Christians do: they tell themselves something that will give them hope. Christians remind themselves of God’s promises. When things go wrong for unbelievers, they say things like, “I’ll figure it out.” They say, “When I get just a little more money, I’ll be able to fix this.” Some get by trusting that the government or science will eventually solve the problem. Others get by believing that their false god will take care of them.

Today, our God shows us that the difference isn’t really in us. In many ways, believers and unbelievers aren’t all that different. Instead, the difference is in what we believe. Unbelievers trust the words of man and the words of Satan. They build their lives on those words. Eventually, those words will fail. Believers trust in the words of God. We build our lives on those words. The words of God will never fail. Today, our God reminds us where our faith comes from. It does not come from us, but from God, because we are Chosen by Grace.

You ever wonder what it would be like if Jesus himself walked in through our church doors? What would it be like for him to stand in this pulpit and speak to us? The people of Israel were blessed to have Jesus himself among them. They had been looking forward to the Messiah for centuries. Many of them thought, “Won’t God be proud of us! Look! We’re children of Abraham! We have the Words of God written for us.”

But when Jesus came, he wasn’t proud of them. Instead he condemned them, he called them to repentance, and his heart mourned for them when they rejected him. Jesus, throughout his ministry, warned the people of Israel that they were not trusting in the words of God but they were trusting in the words of men and the words of Satan. But the people didn’t want to hear it. And so they rejected Jesus, who spoke the very words of God to them, and in so doing they rejected the very God they claimed to be following.

Our lessons today showed pretty clearly that Israel as a nation, though they were God’s chosen people, rejected God. In Romans, chapter 11, the Apostle Paul answers this question: did *God* then reject the people that he had chosen? Did God choose the Israelites, only to say, “Nah, just kidding.” Essentially, are the Jews, the physical blood descendants of Abraham; are they beyond salvation?

Paul says, “Of course not!” Paul himself was a Jew by physical descent, but he

remained one of God's chosen people by faith, not by blood. Paul did not trust in his ancestry, but in God's gracious promises to him. He trusted the Words of God and not the words of man and of Satan.

Paul points to the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament to show that there had always been believers and unbelievers within the physical nation of Israel. In Elijah's day, many of the physical nation of Israel rejected God through unbelief, even to the point that Elijah believed himself to be the only believer left. God told Elijah back then that there was still a remnant, a number of people within that physical nation of Israel, who remained God's true people through faith, by trusting in God's promises.

Paul explains that, yes, God had chosen the physical nation of Israel to be his people, but many of the Israelites rejected that call. They trusted in their ancestry or they trusted in the spiritual privileges that they had, instead of actually listening to what God said to them and trusting in his promises. Their misplaced faith led them to reject the true God.

And yet, even though many of the Israelites rejected God, God had still called the Israelites, and since God is always faithful to his Word, he kept a remnant, a number of believers among the Israelites who still truly were God's people.

Remember, God looks at the heart. He doesn't look at the things you and I do. We can judge someone by what they do and say, but God judges according to the heart. We can look at a group of people and say, "I think these are God's people because they go to church or because they read their Bibles," but only God is able to look at their hearts. He alone knows who believes and who doesn't.

Paul's point in all this comes in verse 6: God's people are chosen only by grace; nothing else. We are saved only by God's grace. God's people are not those born to the right family, or with the right upbringing; they are not those given the greatest spiritual privileges in life. Instead, God's chosen people, those who trust in God's promises, those who will be in heaven for eternity, have always been chosen by God's grace, by God's undeserved love for sinners.

Notice how Paul describes grace too. He says, "*if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*" Some churches teach that grace is a power that God gives us to finish our salvation by our works, by our efforts, by what we do. Paul makes the point that if grace has anything to do with our works, what we do, then grace isn't grace.

Grace is only God's undeserved love for us. We are saved by God's unconditional love, by his mercy, by his generosity. We aren't saved because we will pay God back someday. We aren't saved because we are more worthy than

unbelievers. We aren't saved because we are more faithful to God than all those rebellious unbelievers out there. We are Chosen by Grace. This comes from God alone and not from ourselves. We are not better than unbelievers, but we are better off.

In Romans, Paul tells us about the spiritual situation of the Jews in his day to make 3 points to us.

1) All of us, no matter our nationality, are saved by God's grace alone. Our family history, our spiritual privileges, none of those things matter. If we trust in those things, we are not trusting in the Words of God. Instead, we are saved by God's great love to us in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

2) If we are saved by God's grace alone, don't look down on unbelievers! Paul says in Romans that one of the reasons he preached to the Gentiles was because he hoped that the Gentiles who converted to Christianity would, in turn, lead the unbelieving Jews to faith in Christ! Paul did not want Gentile believers to look down on the Jews, but to look at them with hope that they too would believe someday! If we are saved by grace alone, then no one is outside the possibility of salvation! God is reaching out to the whole world with the gospel message. Never call someone a lost cause for the kingdom of God, because it does not depend on them and it does not depend on us. It all depends on God's grace, his undeserved love for sinners.

3) This last point, which Paul makes specifically in our text for today, is a warning to us. The Jews had ignored God's Word and, eventually, God took that Word away from them.

The Jews had spiritual blessings and privileges. They were Abraham's descendants, they did have God's Word. But they trusted in those things, rather than letting those things drive them deeper into God's Word. They built their lives on the words of men and of Satan rather than on God's Word. When Jesus called them to repent, they were furious. "We don't need to repent! We are the right people! We have the truth! We don't need to listen to you, Jesus!" they said.

Paul gives this warning to us today. As Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, I think it's easy for us to hang our hats on the fact that we have the true doctrines of Scripture, but then never open our Bibles. Being WELS members, going to Sunday School and Catechism, growing up in a Christian home, those things are great spiritual privileges, but they can also become a trap. Those things are only useful if they drive us deeper into God's Word. If they keep us out of the Bible, if they keep us from building our lives on God's Word, they really are more harm than good.

Our faith is not in the fact that we are Lutheran or that we went to Sunday school and Catechism. Our faith is not in how our parents raised us. Our faith is in

Christ alone! If our faith in those things keeps us from studying the Bible, we risk hardening ourselves against God's Word.

God has promised us that the Bible is his Word. So let's treat the Bible like God speaking to us. Let's dig into the Bible together. Let's build our lives on what it says! Honestly, it worries me that so few WELS members come to Bible study. I know there's a billion reasons not to go, but do many of us not go to Bible study because we are trusting in something other than God's Word? How can we believe the Bible truly is God speaking to us and yet so few of us be interested in actually reading the Words of God and learning what he has promised us?

Again, Paul points us to Israel to warn us what can happen when people ignore God's Word, when people take the Word for granted. When people don't care to hear God's Word, there may come a time when God takes that Word away and lets us wallow in our own delusions, trusting in the words of men and the words of Satan. Let's not reject Jesus like the Israelites did because "*we* are the right people" or because "*we* have the truth."

Instead, let's listen to that truth. Let's hear God's call to repentance. Let that warning drive us back to God's Word. Let that warning drive us to read the Bible on our own and with our fellow Christians. Because in the Scriptures, our God again reminds us that there is forgiveness for every sin, even for ignoring and despising God's Word. In the Bible, God reminds us that we are his children, not because of some great thing we have done or will do. In the Scriptures, God shows us that we are his because we are Chosen by Grace. Amen.