

God Keeps His Promises

Romans 11:1-36

Key Verse: 5

“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.”

All of us desire to do it, but very few of us can actually say that we have done it. What am I talking about? Keeping our promises. We have a tough time keeping our promises. For example, who better to keep our promises to but ourselves? However when we look at the success rate of our New Year's resolutions, most of which are broke within a month, we realize that we are terrible at keeping promises. And if we can't keep the promises that we make to ourselves, then who can we keep them for? God has made some promises too, specifically I remember two of them, God's covenant to Abraham in Genesis 15 where he promised to give the land from the Nile river in Egypt to the River Euphrates in Iraq to his people and another one to David in 2 Samuel 7 when God promised that David's descendents, his kingdom and his throne would endure forever. Israel is God's chosen people and he has made several promises to them, but when we read the Bible we find that when Israel rejected God, God's blessing and the gospel has moved to the Gentiles. And when we look at the world today, it seems as if even God has broken his promises to his chosen people. They don't own the land from the Nile to the Euphrates and there isn't even a throne in Israel anymore, so my question is this, since God had made promises to the Israelites and it appears that he hasn't kept them, what makes us think that God will keep the promises he made to us? How can we be secure in our salvation when it looks as if God doesn't keep his promises? But through this passage today, I hope that you'll see that God does keep his promises, he is faithful and he is gracious.

Our passage starts in verse 1, take a look. “I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.” This is in response to what Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah in chapter 10:21, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” If someone held out their hand all day long and no one accepted it, the natural reaction would be, “Ok, if you don't accept me, then I reject you.” The people of Israel could have felt that God had rejected them. If there were anyone that deserved to be rejected it would have been Israel because they killed God's son. It was a terrible sin against God. However, Paul states clearly that God had not rejected his people. In fact, Paul himself was the evidence of this. Paul was a Pharisee and he had been passionately carrying out their cause persecuting everyone that professed faith in Jesus. He was an enemy to the early Christian church. However it was then that the Lord Jesus visited him personally. You might think that Jesus visited him to put a smack down on Paul and protect his people. But Jesus did not go to Paul to condemn him, but to forgive him and Jesus commissioned him as his servant to be an apostle to the Gentiles, the very people the Jews despised. When Paul thought about God's grace upon his own life, he was convinced that God had not rejected his people but in reality God was with his people through the remnant that accepted Jesus. And Paul himself was one of the remnants.

Throughout history, God has worked through his remnant. What do I mean by remnant? The remnant is whatever that remains. It is the leftovers, the scraps. It's like after you've eaten a steak, pork chop or chicken, and you cut away the fat, grizzle and nasty things from the bone – the stuff you left behind is the remnant. Remnant sounds better than leftovers. God works through his remnant. God keeps his promise, to and through, his remnant people. For example, the prophet Elijah, who was known for his great spirit, stood on God's side during a terrible period of Godlessness. Even God's own chosen people were too corrupted to stand with Elijah on God's side. The power of Satan, working through evil King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, was so overwhelming. Finally, Elijah appealed

to God against Israel: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me.” (v3) Elijah was discouraged and tired after serving God in what seemed like a fruitless effort. And this was even after he had won a great victory. He became depressed and wanted to give up serving God. Sometimes we may feel like him when our ministry seems dry and fruitless. When we see the immorality, violence and godlessness in our own time we are shocked and sometimes we feel too depressed to continue. How did God respond to Elijah when he was in this state, take a look at verse 4. “...‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’” Even though Elijah felt depressed, God wasn’t. God’s work was still going on in Israel. Essentially what God was telling Elijah, don’t be caught in yourself pity, repent and wake up, take a look around, my people are everywhere, if you have eyes to see them. What Elijah didn’t realize was that God was quietly, but steadily, helping individual Israelites to remain true to God and not compromise their life of faith by worshiping idols. Elijah was a powerful servant of God, later he would even appear to Jesus with Moses on the transfiguration mountain, so it’s somewhat surprising to us that he didn’t know that there were seven thousand remnant people who stood on God’s side.

Paul understood this and he realized that God was also working through a remnant in his generation too. Look at verse 5, “So, too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.” During Paul’s missionary journeys he preached first in Jewish synagogues in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Ephesus. However, the majority of Jews quickly turned against Paul and became enemies of the gospel, but a few of them did accept the message, such as Priscilla, Aquila, and Timothy. These remnant people became the foundation for God’s church in every city. The Twelve apostles were also remnant people. Peter, James, John, and company were all Israelites. Yet they were chosen by the grace of God and raised as shepherds for his people. God’s history is the history of his remnant people down through the generations. God was keeping his promise to his remnant people.

While world history seems to thrash about like hurricane Sandy, God’s work continues steadily through his remnant people. Jesus taught the parable of the sower. (Mk 4:1-20) The gospel message goes out to all kinds of people. Sadly, most of them don’t accept it but a few do. Yet this minority has the capacity to bear abundant spiritual fruit, in greater proportion to their number. In the parable of the sower, only 25% accepted the message and yet this minority produced 100 times their number. Therefore, we must have eyes to see through the changing trends of the world and to recognize God’s remnant people. God is carrying out his work through his remnant people. They say that the ocean contains 3.5% salt, but if you’ve ever tasted it, it’s extremely salty. Think of the influence of that small amount of salt. Now imagine if we had that kind of remnant people here on the IIT campus, in our city and in our nation what kind of impact would that make?

There are so many good examples of remnant people in the Bible, Noah, Abraham, Elijah, Nehemiah, but take Abraham for example. He was just one man that seemed too old to do anything and not to mention that he was somewhat sorrowful because he had no son. But God said to him, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2,3). Abraham accepted God’s promise and lived by faith. God kept his promise and worked through Abraham’s faith to bless the whole world down through the generations. We recognize Abraham as the father of faith, but not many people in Abraham’s generation saw that. We continually pray for our nation, but from the looks of it, it does not seem to be working. We might be tempted to think that not many true Christians exist but according to God’s word, I believe that there are many of God’s remnant people scattered throughout the world. It’s just that we haven’t seen them yet. What’s more important to

remember is that each of us, when we accept Jesus, are God's remnant people for our time. Sometimes when we look at ourselves, all we can see is our own sins and problems which make us feel depressed and useless. However, by God's grace, we are his remnant people and if God is for us, who can be against us. Take a look at verse 6. "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." From this verse we can see that we don't have to worry if we are good enough to carry out God's work because he helps us by his grace. God's remnant are all around us, in our class, at our work, in our families and in our neighborhoods. They will accept our invitation to Bible study if we invite them. Like Elijah, let's repent and ask God to help us see his remnant around us.

Though God kept his promise through a remnant, the fact remained that as a nation, Israel had rejected Christ. John says, "Jesus came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (Jn 1:11) When people confront God's grace in Jesus and reject it, something happens to them, they hardened their hearts. Look at verses 7-8. "What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.'" God gave a spirit of stupor to those who reject Christ. This makes them feel dazed and confused and become dysfunctional. The human heart is delicate. When it rejects God, or the truth, it gets hard. Foolish people think that if they don't like something they can just forget about it but those who harden their hearts toward God become stupid and foolish. Spiritually speaking, they become blind and deaf. They think they are ok, but in reality they become the enemies of God. But hardening our heart is not the only thing we have to watch out for. David said in verse 9, "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them." Here "Table" refers to God's blessing, such as their privilege of being a chosen people. Ironically, this very blessing made them proud and eventually they thought that they were ok and when the Messiah came, they rejected him. This is a danger for all of us. I remember a Jewish guy that I studied the Bible with several years ago. He said to me, "Us Jews are God's chosen people, the rest of you are on the outside just hoping to get in." I was amazed at his candid statement. But this can trap anyone who becomes proud of themselves or even of the blessing that God graciously gives us. Therefore we must guard our hearts against this.

Look at verse 11. "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious." When the Israelites hardened their hearts and rejected the gospel, the consequences were serious. However, Paul saw God's hidden purpose at work even in this. It was to make Israel envious. In this way, God wanted to motivate them to accept Jesus and fulfill God's purpose for them. The Israelites were God's chosen people, his treasured possession, but in the time of blessing they became proud and lazy. They enjoyed the milk and honey of the Promised Land and totally ignored God's purpose for them, what's worse, they rejected Jesus when he came. Then God sent the gospel to the Gentiles. During Paul's time, Gentile churches sprang up in Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus and even in Rome. The gospel was being spread among Gentiles to the ends of the earth. The Gentiles came to know God personally. The Gentiles became the instruments of spreading God's grace to the world. God had a hidden reason for pouring his blessing upon the Gentiles: it was to make Israel envious. God wanted to arouse the Jews to envy by pouring his abundant blessing on the Gentiles. To Paul, it was clear that God still had a great hope for his people to come back to him. This reminds me of Romans 8:28 and how God uses all things for his good purpose.

In verses 13-16, Paul teaches the Gentiles how to see themselves and the Israelites in God's redemptive history. The Gentiles are like the Syrophenician woman who came to Jesus for his blessing. Jesus told her that he had to go to the Jews first, however she was willing to take whatever leftover crumbs of blessing that remained. (Mk 7:28) This woman was so happy to have Jesus'

leftovers. Usually we don't like the leftovers because it's what was left behind – the waste. God works through the leftovers. Remember how God blessed the five loaves and two fish, 12 baskets full were left over. However we should not get proud because of God's blessing. We have to remember how much God loves Israel. Our Puritan forefathers, such as Jonathan Edwards, prayed for Israel to accept Jesus as Lord and be saved. They believed that this would bring great blessing on the whole world. Verse 15 says it would be like the dead coming to life. In verse 16, Paul uses the offering of first fruits to teach that through the remnant God hopes to restore all Israel. Look at verse 17. "If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root..." Jews who did not accept Jesus because of pride and unbelief became like broken off branches; they were excluded from God's history. The wild olive shoot refers to the Gentiles who comparatively were undisciplined and useless. But God grafted them into the cultivated olive tree so they could enjoy the nourishing sap from the olive root. This was nothing new. God had been grafting in his chosen people for a long time. Think about Ruth, who was a Moabite, or Rahab a prostitute both of which were outsiders that were grafted into God's family. The Gentile Christians were also grafted in branches that could, upon discovering God's great favor toward them, easily have become proud. But if they became proud and unbelieving, they too would be cut off. (22b) So Paul warns them: "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid." (20b) We must recognize God's kindness and be grateful to him. (22)

Finally, Paul saw God's mysterious hope that all Israel would be saved. How could this be? Look at verses 26b-27, "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." This deliverer is Jesus Christ. When the Jews simply receive him as Lord they can have forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. If they insist on their own righteousness, they are enemies of the gospel but God loves them on account of the patriarchs and he sees their disobedience as the opportunity to receive mercy. God is full of hope. Look at verse 32. "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." God hopes that all people, Jews and Gentiles, will be saved. This is evident even today if we think about the ministry Jews for Jesus who carry God's message to modern day Israel. I have met both types of Jews, the old school type and even those who have put their hope in Jesus. God hopes that all people, Jews and Gentiles, will be saved. When Paul realized this he almost breaks out in song take a look at verses 33-36. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." This brings me back to the beginning of the message, when we realize that God has kept his promise to his people, even though they have rejected him, we see how faithful God really is and we can be assured that he will keep his promise to us. God loves us, that is why he sent his precious son Jesus to pay the price for our sins, so that the way for us to come back to him will be open.