

ROMANS XL: SEVEN THOUSAND BY GRACE

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INTRODUCTION:

In times of spiritual declension—which we are certainly in—it is very easy to fall into the trap that Elijah fell into. Flatterers and false teachers always tell us that things are far better than we think, but when we work our way past their lies, we often have to be reassured by God Himself that things are not nearly as bad as we think. This is not blind optimism; this is faith.

THE TEXT:

“I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elias? how he maketh intercession to God against Israel, saying, Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life. But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Rom. II:I-6).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

If there are two ways of hearing, what conclusion may we draw? If there are two ways of being Israel, what conclusion may we not draw? We may not conclude that God has cast away His people (v. 1). Saul speaks as a member of the remnant—he is a son of Abraham, an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin. Those whom God foreknew have not been cast off (v. 2); this means that the promises were fulfilled in and through the remnant. Elijah prayed against Israel (v. 2), but he was praying against one Israel when God had preserved another. Elijah’s complaint was that they had killed God’s prophets, they had thrown down His altars, and they were trying to kill Elijah, the one man still remaining (v. 3). How did God answer His prophet? Paul then quotes I Kings 19:18. God said that He had reserved to Himself seven thousand men that had not bent the knee to Baal (v. 4). Paul says that the first century had a remnant according to the election of grace in the same way (v. 5). And if by grace, then the seven thousand were not preserved by their works (v. 6). He plainly says that works and grace cannot abide together; one drives out the other (v. 6).

GOD RESERVED THE FAITHFUL TO HIMSELF:

There is a profound question created by two Israels, two ways of hearing God. What are we to say when judgment falls on one way of being Israel, because of that Israel’s apostasy? Has God cast away His people? God forbid. God’s word will never return to Him void (Is.). Note that God is the subject of the sentences. God has not cast off. God has reserved to Himself seven thousand faithful men. Paul anchors the point beyond all dispute. The remnant of Israel that remained was a “remnant according to the election of grace.” There were seven thousand according to the sovereign and free determination of God. Reformations that are not grounded on the free and unalterable gift of God are not reformations at all. That is the foundational point that Paul is making here.

GRACE AND WORKS:

And note that Paul argues that the difference between grace and works is not one that admits of compromise. You cannot split the difference between these two. Introduce any element of works into the equation, and it drives out grace. And true grace, faithfully preached, will drive all works of the law before it. And it is important to remember that we are not talking about grace on paper, but rather grace in action.

A TYPICAL ENCOURAGEMENT:

Elijah and Elisha were the leaders in a renewal movement, located in the midst of a wicked and apostate Israel. They did not constitute what we might call a “free church” movement, but neither were they lap dogs for the kings and corrupt priesthood. The schools of the prophets were simultaneously part of and separate from the wicked nation they prophesied to.

APPLICATIONS FOR US:

We live in comparable times. We do not live in a time that would be typified by the conquests of Joshua, or the rise of David, or the established glories of Solomon. We live in a time when idolatry and syncretism are largely accepted, even within the evangelical church. We live in a time when other gods are exalted in the public square in the name of diversity. We live in a time when wicked men appear to be able to do as they please, egged on by the Jezebels behind them. We live in a time when children (by the million) are being caused to pass through the fire. And we live in a time when, if we held a conference to protest these monstrosities, we could get at least seven thousand to come. Not very much, but our God can work by many or by few (1 Sam. 14:6). Here then are three basic principles for us to apply to our day:

First, if any “saving America” is to be done, then the true God will do it through Jesus. He will not share His glory with another, and we are not permitted to offer to share it for the sake of building coalitions. God reserves the seven thousand, and we must reserve the right of God to be God.

Second, worship is the key. Worship is the litmus test. How does God identify the good guys? He speaks to Elijah about what they did and did not do in worship. He didn’t say whether they were registered to vote, and He didn’t say whether they paid any of Ahab’s taxes. The watershed issue is always worship, and the downstream issues, while important, are not the place to begin. They are not where we place our trust—even though we must get there as well. The thing God mentions to Elijah is where the seven thousand have not bowed, and what they have not kissed.

And third, the relationship between faithful communities and apostate larger communities is a complicated one. There is a delicate balance here that only the Spirit of God can enable us to achieve. The faithful communities are distinct but not detached. In our day, we have to struggle with the misunderstandings of Christians who fail to get this principle right. They are either “distinct and detached,” which is an escapist religion, or they are “not distinct and not detached,” which is muddle and compromise.



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