

By No Means!

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The words "By no means!" are Saint Paul's emphatic answer to a rhetorical question he asks in Romans 11: 2: Has God rejected His people? Paul identifies himself as one of those people, an Israelite, descended from Abraham and belonging to the tribe of Benjamin. He then says, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew." Israel is and will always be the people God "foreknew" and will never reject, as promised in the Old Testament.

Paul acknowledges that Israel has often abandoned God by worshipping false deities. Many years earlier the prophet Elijah was so aware of this same kind of abandonment that he told God, "I alone am left." But God assured Elijah that He had kept for Himself a remnant, "seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Ba'al."

Paul then says, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." But the larger part of Israel, aside from this believing remnant, has refused to believe, and so God has given them a "spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear."

What is God's reason for doing this? Is it to make them "stumble so as to fall?" Again Paul insists, "By no means!" God's purpose is to stir the Israelites to jealousy when they see Him turn to the Gentiles. That jealousy will make them turn back to Him. Paul puts it in personal terms: "Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them."

Paul cautions the Gentiles not to boast that they are keeping the faith while the Jews have failed to do so. He calls Israel the root of a "cultivated olive tree," while the Gentiles "have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree" and grafted into the cultivated one. Israel's disobedience to God was the means of the Gentiles being brought to faith in Him, but the Israelites are still the "natural branches" which will be "grafted back into their own olive tree."

We can't fully understand God's inscrutable ways, Paul says, but we do know that the one necessary thing, for both Jews and Gentiles, is faith in the Deliverer sent by God: Jesus Christ. In Acts 2:37-40 we have the example of many Jews joining the Church when they hear Peter preach about Him. It is these Jews, with the Gentiles, who will be the members of the early Church.

Saint John Chrysostom, commenting on this chapter, says that salvation is open to all of us if we will "order [our] own doings aright." And we do that, he says, "...by being free of all passions, and showing gentleness to them that affront and wrong us. For thy Father is so to them that blaspheme Him."