



A few weeks ago we had the privilege of honoring and praying for Jacob and Abi Storbakken before they returned home for China. Notice that I said "return home." Jacob was raised in Wisconsin and Abi grew up in Singapore but right now their home is in China. Also notice that I said it was a privilege to honor them and I mean that. Most of us will never be sent out like they have so as we have opportunity. It should be our honor and privilege to do what we can to honor, bless, encourage and pray for families like the Storbakkens and the Seeleys, who will be with us next month.

How many missionaries do you think were inspired by Isaiah's famous call to the ministry? *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me" (Isaiah 6:8).* The Lord called and Isaiah answered the call. This text has often been used countless times to arouse a missionary calling and send men and women to foreign lands.

In 1868 there was a well known hymn drawn from Isaiah's call to ministry. This one has some great lyrics.

Here Am I, Send Me

(Daniel March, 1868)

Hark! the voice of Jesus crying,
"Who will go and work today?
Fields are white and harvests waiting;
Who will bear the sheave away?"
Loud and long the Master calleth;
Rich reward He offers free;
Who will answer, gladly saying,
"Here am I; send me, send me"?

Let none hear you idly saying,
"There is nothing I can do,"
While the souls of men are dying,
And the Master calls for you:
Take the task He gives you gladly;
Let His work your pleasure be;
Answer quickly when He calleth,
"Here am I; send me, send me!"

If you fast forward 140 years we have an [updated song with the exact same](#) title by Matt Papa.

Here Am I, Send Me

(Matt Papa, 2010)

Lord here am I won't You send me to
The broken and the weak
To the desperate and forgotten Lord
I'm giving You everything
All my selfish plans, my greedy hands
My hope in the American dream
Lord I give my life, lay down my pride
I'm giving You everything, God,

Here am I send me
I'll follow wherever You lead
I will tell the world that Jesus is the way
Send me Lord here I am
I offer my dreams my plans
I will give my life a living sacrifice
Lord here I am

But are you aware of the context of Isaiah's call to ministry? Do you have any idea what the Lord said immediately after this? Check this out.

8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." 9 And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

*" 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' "*

*10 Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."*

Wow. It's probably not what you thought it would be, is it? The mission and calling of Isaiah was to speak a message of blindness and hardness of heart to Israel. And notice the purpose of Isaiah's message: *lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.*" God wanted them to have hardened hearts *so that* they would not repent and be saved.

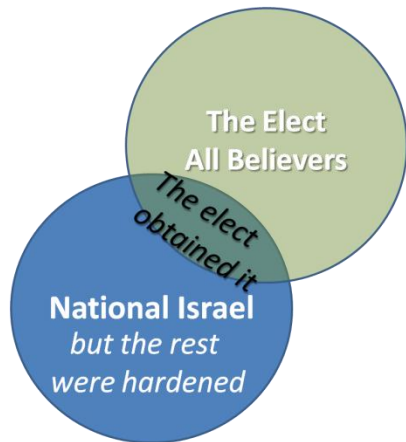
This is exactly what Paul taught in our passage in Romans 11. Let's read it together.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 3 "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." 4 But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5 So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. 7 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, 8 as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day." (Deut. 29:4) 9 And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; 10 let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever." (Psalm 69:22-23)

last week we left off in verse four with Elijah and his cry to the Lord. *For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away"* (1 Kings 19:10). Paul gave us the Lord's response to Elijah in verse four. *But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."* And then in verse five, Paul gave the application. *So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.*

Elijah and Paul lived under similar circumstances; both were prophets to their people and experienced nothing but rejection. Just as God retained a small group of elect people in Elijah's day, so God has retained a small group of the elect in Paul's day. Then, so as to be crystal clear and leave no room for doubt, Paul explained why and how there was a remnant. *But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*

Grace—that beautiful, word that believers love. Grace is unmerited favor from the Lord, freely given. But do we really understand grace? We sing about it and preach about it and speak of it, but do we fully grasp what it means? What Paul wrote next is one of the clearest and most overlooked explanations of grace in all of Scripture. He explained grace by describing what the absence of grace looks like.



Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking

Verse 7: *What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.* Let me illustrate this for you in graphic form. Israel is obviously national Israel. The physical descendants of Abraham. And what did Israel fail to obtain? They failed to obtain God's righteousness because they sought it by works. Just like we saw in the last chapter. *For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness* (Romans 10:3). Paul has restated this many times in this letter to the Romans.

But the elect did obtain God's righteousness. Who are the elect? In this case, Paul is referring to Jews who are part of the elect but of course there is a larger category of all believers who are "the elect." The elect are everyone who have been chosen by God's grace. You could also say that the elect are all believers. So if you take the category of all believers and overlap it with national Israel, the part that overlaps are the elect Jews. The elect from within Israel obtained God's righteousness, not by works. but by grace. And what about the non-elect? Paul says that "the rest were hardened." The hearts of every non-elect Jew were hardened.

But how and why were they hardened? This is the key to understanding grace. Here's the answer. *"God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."* Paul was actually pulling together two different Old testament passages.

Romans 11:8	Isaiah 29	Deuteronomy 29:4
God gave them a spirit of stupor	For the LORD has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep	the LORD has not given you a heart to understand
eyes that would not see	and has closed your eyes	eyes to see
ears that would not hear	and covered your heads	or ears to hear
down to this very day		But to this day

So we have a Scripture from the Law, Deuteronomy and from the Prophets, Isaiah. They all say the same thing--God has hardened their hearts so they cannot see and understand. God is the one doing the action, doing the hardening: God gave them a spirit of stupor. Now it's important to point out that a hard heart is the natural state of every person. So in this sense, God did not need to harden anyone. As Isaiah himself says later in his book. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way* (Isaiah 53:6). So by hardening us, God is, in a sense, keeping the hearts of those people in a hardened state.

So this is the context in which to understand grace. Grace is God removing hardness, blindness and deafness from us so that we can believe the gospel. The elect receive this grace and the rest remain hardened.

This hardening is what caused Paul to shift the direction of his life-Paul turned to the Gentiles.

Acts 13:44-*And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.*

This hardening was taught clearly by Jesus, quoting the exact same verse in Isaiah 6, following the parable of the soils.

10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."'¹

Also using Isaiah 6, John concluded that this hardening meant that "they could not believe."

37 Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, 38 so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

39 Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

40 "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." (John 12:37-40)

Are you getting the picture here? From Moses to Isaiah to Jesus to Paul and arguably down to our very day, there is a hardening over the Jewish people. And the only thing that will break this hardening is the free grace of God. And that is true for everyone, Jew or Gentile. Only grace can shatter the hard heart. And since God is the one who hardens a heart, only his grace will release his own hardening.

Now here is where I hear the main objection to this Scripture. Some will say that Paul is talking about Jews as a group, as a nation, in a corporate sense. This is not referring to the hardening or the salvation of individuals. You cannot dispute the fact that Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, all 4 gospel writers and Paul all taught the same thing: God hardens and God elects through grace. That much is undisputed so all that's left is the objection that it is hardening in a corporate sense and not an individual sense.

But let me give you a few reasons why that can't be the case.

1. People who offer this objection are saying that God only hardens groups of people but he doesn't harden individuals. But why is that a better or more palatable option to you? Either way, God is doing the hardening, right? Moreover, if God hardens the hearts of a group and I am part of that group, then will I not be hardened? If the fact that God hardens some is irrefutable, then lumping people into groups does not help anything.

2. God elects people as individuals. He doesn't elect entire groups of people so why would he harden entire groups of people? We know that at least some people from every tribe, nation, people and language will be saved. We have that guarantee, but do you believe that God will save every last person within these people groups? he certainly could do that, but do you believe that he saves them as entire groups or as individuals within the group? And if God doesn't elect people as whole groups then why would you conclude that God hardens people as whole groups?

3. If you think that God hardens the Jews as a group, then you are saying that none of them can be saved. If even one person is saved out of that group, as Paul certainly was, then God is obviously not hardening everyone in that group. This means that he is hardening some individuals and not others. But then verse seven contradicts your position: *Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.* Some of the Jews were elect but the rest were hardened, so God is not treating them as a whole unit, is he?

Let me draw some applications from this.

1. Rejoice that you have this gift of grace.

If it were any way other than this, as Paul rightly said, *grace would no longer be grace.* One commentator explained it this way. "For grace demands that God be perfectly free to bestow his favor on whomever he chooses. But if God's election were based on what human beings do, his freedom would be violated and he would no longer be acting in grace."² So this is grace and anything less than grace would not be grace. Is this how you have understood grace? If God must give you his grace then it is not grace. It is freely given to whomever he wills to give it. And the fact that you have received it is a gift beyond imagination.

2. Never concern yourself with who might be elect.

Many people will say, "But if God elects and hardens, why should I even share my faith?" It should be clear that God elects and God hardens but only he knows who these people are? Tell me this. Have you ever seen a completely hardened person get saved? I mean, if you knew that person before you might think he or she was the *last* person you'd think would ever get saved? maybe I am describing you! So God can soften the hardest of hearts and since we don't know who that is, we must share the good news with everyone.



Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking

The only way you can know the elect is after they are elected. Do you remember how I defined the elect in the graphic? (above) The elect are all believers from every tribe, nation, people and language. If you have placed your faith in Christ alone for salvation and if you hold onto this faith, you are part of the elect. This is what John 3:16 states. *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* Who are the elect who receive eternal life? All of those who believe.

3. Pray for and proclaim to everyone because they might be the elect.

Paul's knowledge of God's hardening and electing did not stop him for one moment. In fact, I would argue that it energized his work. Does this sound like a man who wonders whether he should tell anyone about Christ?

and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation,
(Romans 15:20)

His one great ambition was to preach the gospel to those who have never heard. And this time he quoted from Isaiah 52 to prove his point. Notice how this message is the exact opposite of the Isaiah quote from Romans 11.

but as it is written,

*“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”* (Romans 15:21)

He knew that the Jews were hardened for a season. he know that God ewas sovereign over all of that. It was the Masters plan but it did not slow down Paul one bit. He pressed on with all his energy that God worked in him so mightily.

4. This hardening has an end.

The rest of the story begins in verse 25.

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

God chose the Jews but then hardened them in order to bring his grace to the Gentiles. And once the full number of Gentiles come in, the gospel will spread to the Jews.

5. Be humble and eternally grateful.

This is grace-amazing grace. You can't earn it. You don't deserve it. If we could only grasp our former depravity and utter lostness, then we would crack open the jewel that is grace.

Rich Maurer
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¹ Mark 4:10-12; also Matthew 13:14 and Luke 8:10

² Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, © 1996, p. 678.