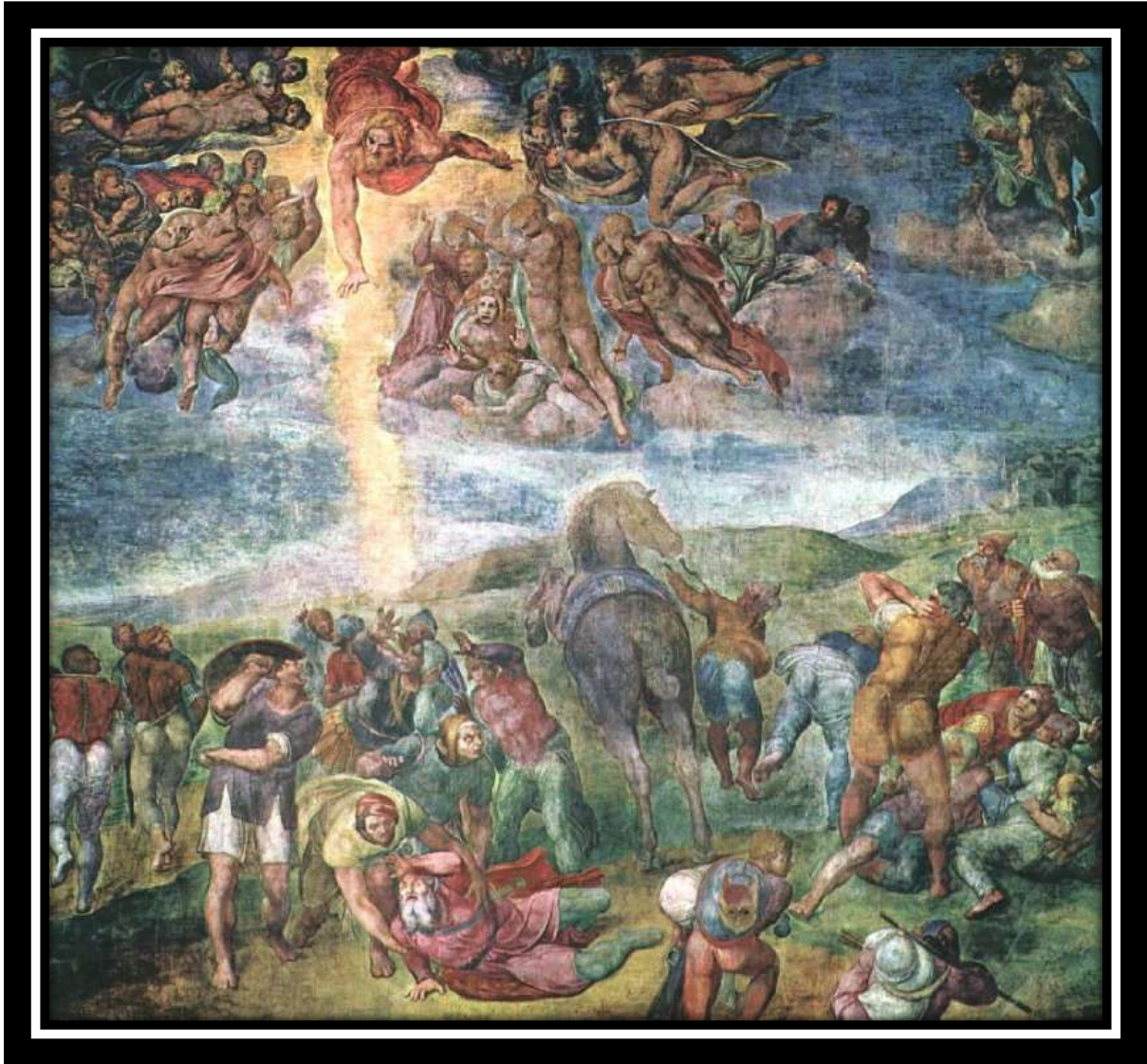


# ROMANS—WEEK 10

## REMNANT THEOLOGY



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

God hasn't cast away Israel; He always keeps a remnant. However, as part of His plan, Israel has largely rejected the gospel. This lets in the gentiles, who are like wild olive branches grafted onto the tree. This should humble us.

It should also make Israel jealous. *In this way all Israel will be saved.*

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1 Romans 11:1–6 (NKJV)

*I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”? But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.*

We’re back to the theme of a remnant, but this time with a new wrinkle. Paul’s point here is that keeping a remnant counts as keeping Israel. As long as God keeps a remnant, He has kept His promise.

This is difficult to accept. We want everyone to be saved, even as we admit that no one deserves to be. Saving only a fraction is troubling and feels like less than total success. Surely that isn’t “just as good as” saving everyone, right?

No. Paul is saying that God’s covenant with His people works differently. God’s plan is to save Israel, not to save individual people. Sure, many individual people get saved, but that’s not how God keeps score. Even calling it keeping score misses the point.

We are individuals. We see things in terms of individuals. God does not. I don’t claim to understand God’s perspective, but it’s definitely something else.

This makes it sound like our getting into heaven is a side effect of the gospel. That’s not it—God’s love for us is a major driving force—but it’s hard to see how this all fits together.

God loves us more than we can imagine. Thus, our imagination can’t even begin to conceive of something even more important than that.

But His holiness, His covenant, and His glory are more important. All this exists on a scale we cannot fathom. As much as God cares about us, we’re still not the most important thing in the universe.

It’s not that we’re unimportant; it’s that the grand scheme of things is so grand.

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This is humbling, but in an especially beautiful way. Instead of being humbled by how small, bad, or unworthy we are, we are humbled by how big, holy, and worthy God is. Instead of being shame-humbled, we’re awe-humbled.

As always, God’s glory is the point—and this is perfectly glorious.

The more we dig into the details, the more we see the grandeur of the gospel.

2 Romans 11:7-12 (NKJV)

*What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written:*

*“God gave them a spirit of stupor,  
Eyes that should not see  
And ears that they should not hear,  
To this very day.”*

*And David says:*

*“Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
A stumbling block and a recompense to them.  
Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see,  
And bow down their back always.”*

*I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!*

This is a great example of the intricate way that God’s plans can work. He blinded Israel *so that they do not see* and thus stumble.

But their stumbling isn’t the endpoint. *Have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not!*

No, that’s not it. Through their stumbling, *salvation has come to the Gentiles*. So, is saving the gentiles the point?

No, that’s not it either. The salvation of the gentiles is to act as a wake-up call to Israel. The goal is still the salvation of Israel—*their fullness!*

So, we see a double-backflip way of bringing salvation to Israel, while also bringing salvation to the gentiles.

How glorious is that?

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Remember this the next time it looks like God’s plans are going off the rails. God knows what He’s doing, even if we don’t. His plans include things that look like setbacks to us, but they aren’t setbacks to Him.

The shortest distance between two points may be a straight line, but the LORD often takes the scenic route.

3 Romans 11:13-18 (NKJV)

*For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*

*For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.*

Imagine what it must feel like to be Paul. He's as pure a Jew as ever was, *circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee* (Philippians 3:5).

But now he's *an apostle to the Gentiles*. He knows God called him to that role and he embraces it fully, but you can feel pain in his words. He loves Israel and he longs desperately to see it restored.

This gives his writing a covenantal focus that gentile believers don't normally think about. It's a covenant between God and His people, Israel. We're now included in that covenant, but it's still the same covenant. Paul wants us to understand how that works.

*You, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.*

It's offensive to him, and to God, when we start thinking we're hot stuff. Of course, that's all too common; it's part of our sinful nature.

Paul combats that by reminding us that even though we are part of God's covenant, we should be especially grateful that we got in.

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Of course, we should be grateful that we got in. The covenant is what's important, not how we benefit from it. We don't deserve to be in it anyway.

One of the tricky aspects of being a believer is being grateful for what He has done for us without falling into a "what have you done for me" form of worship.

God should be worshipped for who He is. There are many hymns, such as "Holy, Holy, Holy" and almost any Christmas carol, that are entirely about God and not about us.

Then there are songs that express our gratefulness for what God has done.

They're okay, but beware of our tendency to sing about nothing else.

4 Romans 11:19-24 (NKJV)

*You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?*

First off, let’s clear up one misconception. The tree here is not Israel; it’s God. *I am the vine, you are the branches.* (John 15:5a)

OK, but then why are the Israelites *natural branches*, while the gentile believers *were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree*? What’s so *natural* about an Israelite?

This is about God’s people and His covenant with them. Throughout history, there has always been a covenant people. There are lots of terms used to describe them—sons of Abraham, sons of God, the remnant, the invisible church, etc.

Before Christ, these people were the Israelites. They were mainly genetic descendants of Israel, though there were exceptions such as Ruth. Faith was always the key, and lack of faith was always the problem. That’s how “remnant” so often ended up being the descriptor; the unfaithful kept getting winnowed out.

Now God has blown the lid off this narrow view of the covenant. God’s covenant people don’t just include a few “token gentiles” with faith being the “secret sauce.” Now faith gets top billing.

But that doesn’t mean that the sons of Abraham have become second fiddle. Israel is still the name of the covenant people; it just isn’t ethnic. We need to understand that to keep from getting cocky.

People are people; they’re going to turn every blessing into grounds for pride. We tend to think that since we’re “saved” we have a “reserved seat” in heaven. That conflates God’s point of view (outside of time) with our point of view (inside of time).

Paul’s warning is blunt. You must *continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.*

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People who claim Jesus as their Lord, need to act like He really is. That doesn’t mean everyone should quit their jobs to do church work. Just the opposite—Paul continued as a tentmaker—but many modern Christians view Jesus as merely their savior instead of their king.

If this nation is going to get the revival it so desperately needs, it must begin in the church. Confessing Christians need to start practicing the kingship of Jesus.

5 Romans 11:25-32 (ESV)

*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. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,*

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;  
“and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”*

*As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*

What Paul’s saying here is that *this mystery* is such a skull-cracker that it will keep you from being *wise in your own sight*. In other words, don’t expect to understand it; it’s designed to humble you.

A lot of folks have a problem with this. They have the wrong reaction to not understanding something. They think that if it doesn’t make sense to them, it doesn’t make sense at all. Thus, it must be wrong.

This form of pride is the mother of all kinds of stupidity. So, Paul warns us that we’re not going to understand this mystery, and to take that in the right way.

And what a mystery it is. God’s plan for Israel is a partial hardening, which will bring in the gentiles, *and in this way all Israel will be saved*.

Furthermore, *as regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*

This seems impossibly strange, but remarkably similar to lots of other parts of the gospel.

No one expected the messiah to be born in a manger either.

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This passage displays God’s unique priorities. It’s an understatement to say that God’s ways are higher than our ways. He has a different concept of higher.

This is the foundation of worship. Anything we can understand isn’t worthy of worship—admiration, maybe, but not worship.

God isn’t just good; He invented goodness. What He is, is holy—a word that’s hard to define. It means something like “other” or “separate.”

Don’t expect to understand. It’s why we worship.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Have you ever seen God grant a portion of a prayer?
2. What was the most surprising answer to prayer you've seen?
3. What's your favorite hymn or Christmas carol?
4. What does it mean to practice the kingship of Jesus?
5. What inspires you to worship?

*Items for prayer:*