

NEVER GIVE UP ON ANYBODY!

Today's Text: Romans 11: 1 - 12

Extracts:

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 their knee to Baal.” Even so then, at this present time *there is a remnant according to the election of grace...* What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded [Rom. 11: 1-7]

During his missionary work in Africa in the 19th Century, Dr David Livingstone met Sechele, the kgosi or chief of the Bakwana tribe, part of the Tswana people in what is now Botswana.¹ He was a rainmaker with many wives but was keen on becoming a Christian. In 1848, he divorced four of his five wives and was baptized. However, the following year, on discovering that one of the divorced women was expecting Sechele's child, Livingstone disowned him. He repented and said to Livingstone, “Do not give me up because of this. I shall never give up Jesus.” Livingstone moved north to embark on his now famous missionary journeys. His last contact with Sechele was in 1852. But when British missionaries arrived that part of Africa in 1859, they were dazed to find a solid Christian church there! Sechele already had church services for his people, the Bible was already popular, and slowly, the Bakwena had become a Christian people. In fact, Sechele has been credited with doing more for Christianity in 19th Century Southern Africa than virtually any single European missionary, including Livingstone himself.

The lesson we learn from that story is never to give up on anybody. You may currently be discouraged or disappointed by what you see of that prodigal child, that corrupt politician or that philanderer of a priest or pastor. Do not give up on them because you do not know what God is going to do with them in due season. In this week's Bible verses, Paul reminds us that God has not given up on Israel just because they have not all accepted Jesus. In due time, they will. So, why should you then give up on anybody? Let this week's interesting study sort things out for us on the subject.

¹ Based on Stephen Tomkins, “The African chief converted to Christianity by Dr Livingstone,” BBC Report, 19 March 2013; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21807368>

1. Background: Why God was lenient on Israel

As I meditated on this week's topic, I was drawn to pay some attention to the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* [Lk 15: 11-32]. The verses that hit me are the following [vv. 17-20]:

But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

In those days, there were no fast means of communication, such as the telephone, the e-mail, text or twitter. Therefore, his father could not have had any advance notice that his lost son was on the way home. Secondly, since he had many hired servants, the man would not be the first person to see his estranged son returning home. His security staff or gardener would come to report the news to him in his inner chambers. But if Daddy was the first person to see his wasteful son returning home, one plausible conclusion we can draw is that he never gave up on him. As he prayed for his safety, he longed for his return. Each day, he would sit at a vantage point in his estate where he could see who was coming in. That was how he was the first person to see his lost son coming back home. He never gave up on him.

Israel is to God as that son was to his father. Of all the peoples on the earth, *God chose Israel as His special people; the nation through whom the Messiah would come to earth in human form. Their prophets spoke of His coming and the people were very expectant. But when Jesus showed Himself to them as the Messiah, they rejected Him and crucified Him on the cross. Should God give them up for that and their continuing rejection of Christ's salvation message? That is the issue that Paul has dealt with in this week's Bible verses.* Paul's answer is that God will not give up on Israel for the following reasons:

a) *There was a remnant*

In Paul's words, "God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew...there is a remnant according to the election of grace" [Rom. 11: 2,5]. After all, Paul himself was an Israelite of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin [v. 1]. All the Lord's apostles and disciples were Israelites. Therefore, God had not cast away all Israelites.

Paul cited Elijah's encounter with God when he found himself in a distressed state. That was after his contest with four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to determine who was serving the true God. As fire came

down from heaven to consume Elijah's burnt sacrifice, the people fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!" At Elijah's command, the people seized the false prophets and helped Elijah to execute them at the Brook Kishon [1 Kgs 18: 1-40]. On hearing what Elijah had done, Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, threatened to retaliate on Elijah who fled into the wilderness for protection. It was while there that he prayed to God, saying, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers." After God had sent an angel to give him food, Elijah heard a still small voice saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He was hiding in a cave! He told the LORD, "I have been zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." God replied him, "Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" [1 Kgs 19: 1-18]. So, just as there was a remnant during the days of Elijah, there was also a remnant during Paul's days. Some Jews had accepted Jesus and they were playing leading roles in spreading the gospel around the then known world.

Most of us tend to be pessimists or fatalists concerning the level of wickedness that we see around us. We see some church leaders behaving as if their ministry is to lead people to hell. We see political office holders stealing with impunity and flaunting their ill-gotten wealth and the law enforcement agencies and the courts looking helpless or turning the other way to harass the small law-breakers. We see sexual immorality being glorified as the in-thing. Then, we conclude that all is lost; that there is no hope. Well, there is always a remnant that cannot be compromised. Everybody is not doing it.²

b) *Their hardheartedness opened the salvation way for the Gentiles*

We are told that "the rest were blinded" but because of their rejection of the gospel message, "salvation has come to the Gentiles" [Rom. 11: 7-11]. Paul became an apostle of the Gentiles [v. 13] because his people did not want to hear his message about Christ.

When God called Abraham out of Syria into Canaan, He promised him, "In you, *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed" [Gen. 12: 1-3]. The people of Israel are the children of Abraham by circumcision. The only way for Abraham to be regarded as the father of all is by faith [Rom. 4: 13-24] which he attained long before he became circumcised [Gen. 15:6; Gen. 17: 24]. *Therefore, the blindness of a majority of the people of Israel to the gospel message was part of God's plan to allow the*

² http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Everybodyisnotdoingit.pdf

salvation message to reach all the children of Abraham, Jew or Gentile. Indeed, the ways of God are mysterious to accomplish His works!

c) *They will ultimately accept Jesus before Judgment Day*

In due season, “All Israel will be saved” because, as Prophet Isaiah had foretold, “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is [God’s] covenant with them, when [He takes] away their sins” [Rom. 11: 26-27; Is. 59: 20-21]. For the sake of their fathers by election, they are beloved “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” [vv. 28-29]. In other words, God does not take away talents that He has given you even when you refuse to use them. For example, if God has gifted you with a sharp brain, you remain intelligent even when you choose to be illiterate or uneducated! So, on account of God’s covenant with the people of Israel, He will not block their way to salvation. In due course, their blindness will be removed; those of them who choose to repent will, like the Gentiles, have access to Jesus Christ.

This can easily be inferred from the order of those who will be sealed on their foreheads before the Great Tribulation. The 144,000 sealed from all the twelve tribes of Israel were preceded by the Gentiles, and “after these things, [John] looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” [Rev. 7: 1-10]. The Gentiles would await the children of Israel on that Day.

From the foregoing, it is clear that ***God has not given up on Israel, no matter how long it will take for Israelites to take off their spiritual blindness and recognise and accept that the Messiah they have been waiting for from the days of Moses has already come. God is ready to wait because He owns time and He has a covenant to keep!*** What lessons can we learn from that?

2. Lessons for us

Right now, you may be dealing with issues of strayed spouses, children, siblings, friends, colleagues and others close to you. You have prayed and fasted. You are beginning to lose hope and thinking of giving up. I would say it is too early to do that! From the foregoing discussion, the following lessons will help you to hold on, not to give up on anybody:

a) *Nobody is completely bad!*

It is quite easy to assume that somebody is completely bad just because we have found him/her bad in one thing. For example, that an accountant is corrupt does not necessarily mean that he is incompetent or not friendly. That your daughter has stopped calling home does not mean she is not missing you. Even in criminal cases, the law courts presume the accused innocent until proved guilty. So, you should give the benefit of the doubt and accept that that person you want to give up may have some redeeming qualities that you can look at.

Take the case of Gehazi, the greedy servant of the prophet Elisha. He fell out of favour with his master when he lied to him concerning the Syrian army general, Naaman, whose leprosy was miraculously cured. Elisha refused the general's gifts but Gehazi went behind his back to say that his master had just received visitors from the sons of the prophets from the mountains of Ephraim, asking for money and clothes. For his greed, Elisha cursed him, saying that the leprosy removed from Naaman would cling to him and his descendants forever [2 Kgs 5: 20-27]. But it took Gehazi's testimony before the king to restore the Shunammite woman's land to her. You may recall the woman whose child was restored to life by Elisha. During a famine called by the LORD, Elisha instructed her to leave Israel with her household for seven years. On her return, she came to the king to plead for her land to be given back to her. At the time, Gehazi was telling the king of Elisha's miracles. Pointing to the woman, he said, "My lord, O king, this is the woman, and this is her son whom Elisha restored to life." On that testimony, the woman's land was restored to her [2 Kgs 8: 1-6]. Gehazi was greedy but he still spoke well of his ex-master.

b) You can only see the beginning, not the end of the matter

As human beings, we can only see the beginning, not the end of the tunnel. We draw hasty conclusions and close the book. Most times, we might come to regret it.

We can learn something here from the Lord Himself. He saw leadership qualities in Peter and decided to make him a fisher of men [Mk 1: 16-17]. During the trial of Jesus, Peter denied Him thrice [Lk 22: 31-34], enough for Peter to be given up. But after His resurrection, when a heavenly host was sending a message on where to find Jesus, he said, "Tell His disciples- and Peter- that He is going before you into Galilee" [Mk 16: 7]. Peter was one of the disciples. By specifically mentioning his name, Jesus was letting him know that he had not been given up, that he was still one of them. Was it not Peter who led the rest after the Lord's ascension into heaven [Acts 1: 15]? Jesus saw Peter beyond his human weaknesses. The Holy Spirit completed it on Pentecost Sunday when Peter's first sermon brought three thousand believers into the Christian fold [Acts 2: 14-41]. The light may indeed be at the end of the tunnel.

c) *It may ultimately be for your own good*

That act of not giving somebody up may turn out to be for your own good. For example, for prophesying that Jerusalem would fall into the hands of invaders from Babylon and that the people (including the king) would be taken into exile, Jeremiah was imprisoned in a dungeon in the king's palace under very unhealthy conditions. Ebed-Melech, an Ethiopian palace servant, went straight to King Zedekiah to plead for better treatment for the innocent prisoner. The king heeded his plea and Jeremiah was pulled out of the dungeon, and he remained a prisoner in the king's court until Jerusalem was invaded [**Jer. 38: 1-28**]. For not giving up on Jeremiah, God rewarded Ebed-Melech. God said to him, "You shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid, for I will surely deliver you... *your life shall be a prize to you, because you have put your trust in Me*" [**Jer. 39: 11-18**].

Indeed, it takes putting your trust in God never to give up on anybody. Let the world laugh at your foolishness. Let the experts warn you not to endanger your life by visiting the asylum to see your violent child. Let family chastise you for wasting your time by waiting endlessly for your estranged spouse. Let people with authority over you threaten you with a sack if you do not lie against your suspended boss that you know is innocent but wrongly accused. Do not give up on them if you trust in God. ***Never give up on the truth of God's word or your trust in Him. In the end, you will be vindicated. You will triumph. You will smile.*** That is the message of this week's study.

3. Conclusion: Jesus will never give you up!

Out of Mary Magdalene, Jesus cast out seven demons [**Lk 8: 2**]. She became a pillar of His ministry and was the first disciple to proclaim the good news of His resurrection [**Lk 24: 1-10**]. Jesus never gave up on her. ***Whoever comes to Him, He will in no wise cast out.*** This is the will of His Father who sent Him- that ***of all He has given Him, He should lose nothing***; but should raise it up at the last day [**Jn 6: 37-40**].

As bad a sinner as you are, Jesus will never give you up. So, why should you give up your neighbour who may not necessarily be worse than you are? As you point an accusing index finger at somebody, only your thumb is reluctantly in support. The other three fingers are firmly pointing back at you, saying, "How about you?" Can you honestly cast the first stone?

Never give up on anybody.