

Mystery and Mercy *Romans 11:25-32*

Have you ever thought, “I can’t imagine that God will ever change that person’s life?” Maybe it is a person who is so hostile and opposed to the things of God that it just seems like a simple conclusion that he or she has no chance to come to faith in Christ. Or, if you think more broadly in terms of people groups, do you ever think, “That’s a group of people that I doubt God will ever draw to himself.” We can look around the world and see groups of people who are violently opposed to Christianity, right? It is pretty easy to see those people and think that surely they have no chance with God.

In a similar way, it was easy for the Gentile believers of Paul’s day to think that when it came to the Jews they had had their chance, but had rejected God and that God was done with them. Just put yourself in their shoes for a bit. When Paul was writing to the Romans, it had only been about 25 or so years since Jesus had been crucified. And of course it was the Jews who had provoked the Romans to execute him. And it was the Jews who had violently opposed the preaching of Christ from the first. Just think about what they did to Stephen when he proclaimed Christ. They stoned him to death (Acts 7). And that hostile opposition continued. If you were a Gentile believer in Rome it would have been very easy to think that God was simply done with the Jews.

In the passage that we are looking at today, Paul wants the Gentile believers to understand that God is not done with the Jews. This is the point that he has been making in all of chapter 11. In the verses that we are looking at today, Paul describes God’s mystery and God’s mercy to continue to argue that God is not finished with the Jews. I think as we consider these verses, there are truths that help us think about those individuals or those people groups that we tend to think have no chance with God.

We are looking at Romans 11:25-32 today. The first thing that Paul talks about is God’s mystery that was revealed to him.

I. God’s Mystery Revealed (vv. 25-27)

²⁵ For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

In Paul’s writings, *mystery*, refers to something that was formerly unknown, but now has been revealed. The mystery was about God’s activity through Christ to include both Gentiles and Jews as God’s people. The Gentile believers of Paul’s day were tempted to think that God had left the Jews behind and that His saving activity was now among the Gentiles. But the mystery revealed to Paul made it clear that both Jews and Gentiles were still contained within God’s eternal plans.

In very simple terms, Paul explains what the context of the mystery is. First, he says “a *partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*” *Hardening* refers to a kind of spiritual blindness or dullness on the part of the Jews. Paul says two things about it. First, it is a *partial*. The nation of Israel has been hardened, but it is only partial because as Paul has taught there was a believing remnant.

The second thing he says about this *hardening* is that it is temporary. It will only last *until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.* *Come in* refers to the idea of entering the kingdom or into spiritual life. And so there is a point when the hardening will cease. We don’t know exactly when that time will be other than that it will be when the *fullness of the Gentiles has entered into the kingdom of God.*

Paul wants the Gentile believers to know this otherwise they will be *wise in [their] own estimation.* They will think that they alone are now the focus of God’s purposes in history. But the mystery reveals that God still has a place for the Jews. In fact, in verse 26 Paul writes,

²⁶ *and so all Israel will be saved;*

The NIV translates this, “and in this way all Israel will be saved.” Paul is explaining the manner by which Israel will be saved. It will happen through the Gentiles’ conversion, which moves the Jews to jealousy (11:11) as they see the Gentiles experiencing salvation. That will ultimately wake them up and cause them to respond.

Now when Paul says *all Israel will be saved* he is not making a claim that each and every Israelite will be saved. Remember in this section of Romans, Paul is focusing on Israel as a corporate whole. And so I believe that his point is that instead of a remnant being saved there will be a day when a vast number of Jews will be saved. It is sort of like if I would say: “The whole neighborhood was out trick or treating last night.” By that I don’t mean that every individual was out, but rather it is a statement about the corporate whole. And as a whole there was a ton of people trick or treating. And so there will be a day when vast numbers of the Jews will turn to faith in Christ and be saved. This is part of the mystery.

Paul then turns to the Scriptures to support this point. He quotes from Isaiah 59 as well as from Isaiah 27:

just as it is written,

*“THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION,
HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.”*

²⁷ *“THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM,
WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”*

If you read this passage back in Isaiah 59:20, it says that the Deliverer will come “to Zion”. But Paul changes it to say “from Zion.” To say, “to Zion,” would point to Jesus’ incarnation and Jesus’ coming to earthy Jerusalem. But when Paul writes that the Deliv-

erer will come “*from Zion*”, he is not speaking about earthly Zion, he is speaking of heavenly Zion. And so, this is a statement about Jesus’ second coming. At that time that there will be this major turning of the Jews to Christ.

These passages from Isaiah paint of picture of what will happen. The Deliverer *will remove ungodliness from Jacob* (*Jacob* is a reference to Israel). At the second coming of Christ, God will work in Israel to turn the Jews from their ungodliness. And God will fulfill the covenant promises that He made with them through Abraham. The last phrase, *when I take away their sins*, is from Isaiah 27:9. Paul sees the fulfillment of the covenant that God made with Abraham in terms of forgiveness of sins through what God did through Christ on the cross.

And so that is the mystery that was revealed. Israel was hardened. And while that happened the Gospel went out to the Gentiles. But that hardening is partial and temporary and there will be a day when vast numbers of Jews would believe. In other words, God’s saving plans includes both Gentiles and Jews.

And so, yes, the Jews had crucified the Messiah. And, yes, as a group they were opposed to the preaching about Christ. But Paul wanted to Gentile believers in Rome to understand that the mystery that was revealed made it clear that God was not done with the Jews.

As we think about God’s revealed mystery, I think there is a principle here that we can apply to our situation and how we tend to view those individuals and groups who seem so unlikely to ever come to Christ. The Jews never would have guessed that God’s plans included the Gentiles. And the Gentile believers in Paul’s day never would have guessed that at some point in the future vast numbers of Jews would come to faith. God sometimes does stuff that we would never expect in matters of salvation. The truth of the matter is that we really have no idea what God might be up to in a person’s life or among a certain people group. What seems impossible to us in matters of salvation isn’t impossible with God.

And so when you think about that individual or that people group who seem so unlikely to come to Christ, you really don’t know. And the fact that God sometimes does stuff that we would never expect in human lives to turn them to Himself should move us to keep praying for them; to keep loving them; to keep pointing them to Christ. We can hold onto the hope that God sometimes does that which seems impossible to us in matters of salvation.

Now as we come to verse 28, Paul moves on to make the point that God’s mercy is required in order for anyone to experience salvation.

II. God’s Mercy Required (vv. 28-32)

In this paragraph that runs from verses 28-32, Paul sums up his argument from all of chapters 9-11. He makes the point that God's mercy is shown to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul writes:

²⁸ From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Paul says that there are two ways of looking at unbelieving Israel. On one hand, *from the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies*. Regarding the gospel that Paul proclaimed about the forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Christ they are enemies of God. When Paul says that they are enemies of God *for your sake* he is saying that Israel's opposition to God was the way God moved in salvation history to extend the Gospel to the Gentiles.

But Paul says that there is another way to think about Israel. From the *standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers*. Because God had made eternal promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in other words *the fathers* of the nation, they are still the people whom God sovereignly and graciously choose to favor. And nothing changes this.

Paul explains why in verse 29 – *for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable*. Back in 9:4-5, Paul listed some of Israel's special privileges. To them belonged the adoption as sons, the covenants and the law and the promises. Their calling as God's chosen people is foremost in these gifts. And these gifts and this calling are *irrevocable*. And so regardless of what is now going on now with Israel, God still has a plan for them. And He does so not because they have earned it or deserve it, but because God is faithful to His word.

In verses 30-31, Paul explains how Israel as God's beloved will experience God's mercy and in doing so, he also explains how the Gentiles experienced God's mercy.

³⁰ For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy.

Paul lays out the broad strokes of how God has worked out salvation history. There was a time when the Gentiles *were disobedient to God*. But eventually, they were *shown mercy*. And the reason the Gentiles were shown mercy was *because of* [the Jews'] *disobedience*.

Paul goes on to say then in verse 31 that *these* [i.e. the Jews] *also now have been disobedient*. The Jews thought they were being obedient as they sought to obey the law, but in fact they were disobedient because they did not obey the Gospel of Christ. But the Jew's disobedience will ultimately become the opportunity for mercy to be shown to

them. When he says that *because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy*, this is the point that he's made before that the saving activity of God among the Gentiles would eventually provoke the Jews to want what the Gentiles had and they would end up coming to belief (11:11).

Now, how is it that Paul can say that Israel has now been *shown mercy* when Israel as a whole still opposed to the Gospel? It is probably an expression of imminence. In other words, the days of fulfillment had come and so this final expression of God's mercy upon Israel could take place, "now, at any time."

In verse 32 then, Paul sums up this section, and, in fact, the whole book of Romans:

³² *For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.*

If anyone is going to experience salvation, God's mercy is required. But the only way one ever sees a need for mercy is if that person sees his or her desperate plight. And one of the things Paul has made clear in the book of Romans that the plight of both Gentiles and Jews is desperate. *God has shut up all in disobedience*. This was the point of the first three chapters of Romans – both Jew and Gentile are guilty before God. He said back in 3:9:

⁹ *What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; ¹⁰ as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;*

God has shut up both Jew and Gentile in the jail of disobedience; the door is slammed shut and the key thrown away. There is no hope of escape. There is nothing anyone can do to earn one's way out. God's mercy is required. And mercy is absolutely a gift from God. It cannot be received by working for it. It is experienced only when one trusts in justifying work of Christ on the cross. And that was the focus of Romans 4-8.

Now, when Paul writes *so that He may show mercy to all*, I think it is best to understand that Paul is not talking about individuals, but rather the corporate entities of Jews and Gentiles. In other words, Paul is saying that God will show mercy to all – both Jews and Gentiles.

Now, as we think about the fact that God's mercy is required, I want to suggest a couple of points of application. First, when it comes to those people who seem so unlikely to be saved, one of the ways we can pray for them is that they would become aware that they are shut up in disobedience. They need to comprehend that whether or not they've been trying to live a good moral life, before a holy God, they are guilty. They are disobedient. Only when a person understands this will she or he look for God's mercy. And so we can pray for that awareness.

The second point is that when we understand that we were shut up in disobedience and were in desperate need of God's mercy, it helps us not be arrogant towards those who don't know God. This is specifically Paul's point here with the Gentiles. And if we can remember that we needed mercy, it can help us love others. Here's how Tim Keller describes how mercy helps us love:

The person who knows that he received mercy while an undeserving enemy of God will have a heart of love for even (and especially!) the most ungrateful and difficult persons. When a Christian sees prostitutes, alcoholics, prisoners, drug addicts, . . . , the homeless, the refugees, he knows that he is looking in a mirror. Perhaps the Christian spent all of his life as a respectable middle-class person. No matter. He thinks: 'Spiritually I was just like these people, though physically and socially I never was where they are now. They are outcasts. I was an outcast.'

(Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 60)

Paul's point is that we were all outcasts. We were all in need of God's mercy. And by remembering our desperate need for God's mercy, it can help us love others. That person who seems so far from God really is like you. They are disobedient. You were disobedient. They need God's mercy to save them. You needed God's mercy to save you. And when we stay clear about this it helps us stay humble and it helps us to love.

Is anyone too far gone – too hostile and opposed or too apathetic to God to ever be saved? Are there whole people groups that have no chance to ever find God? God's mystery and God's mercy suggests that the answer is no. And so we keep hoping; we keep loving; we keep praying; we keep pointing others to faith in Jesus that they too might one day experience God's mercy.