

God's Inscrutable Ways
Romans 11:1-10

As you're probably aware, the Bible is about God. If you read and study the Bible, you will learn many, many things about God. You will learn that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. You will learn that God is powerful, that God knows everything, that God is love. For many reasons, this knowledge of God is the most valuable knowledge a person can have. For example, when we don't understand our circumstances, we go back to what we know about God and say, "Even though my circumstances don't seem fair, I believe that God loves me. He proved that on the cross by sending His one and only Son to die for me." That knowledge of God can give you stability and security in your life. We could multiply examples of why this knowledge of God and His character is invaluable.

Today I want us to consider that even though we know many, many things about God, we don't always understand how He is at work in our lives and in our circumstances. Sometimes it is clear that God has opened or closed a door or that God is showing us mercy through a person or through a circumstance. But many times we really don't know what God is doing. In other words, God's ways are often inscrutable: His ways are beyond our scrutiny.

There are many reason why this is true. For starters, God is a person; He has a mind and a will and a personality. He can choose to do some things and not others. Think about the people you know the best. You don't always understand why they do what they do; the same is true of God. God cannot be reduced to a set of propositions. God is not a complicated piece of software that we can "master." Therefore we can't always say with certainty what God is doing in the present, and we can't always predict what God will do in the future.

A spiritually mature person comes to accept this reality. Instead of thinking, "Unless I can understand exactly what God is doing, I can't trust Him," a spiritually mature person realizes, "Even though His ways are beyond my scrutiny, I trust Him. God has a track record of faithfulness and compassion. Everything I know about God confirms that I can trust Him."

In today's passage (Romans 11:1–10) Paul confronts people who said things about God that weren't true; they claimed to know what God was doing, when in reality they didn't. Specifically, they said that since the Jewish people had largely rejected the message about Christ, God had rejected them. That was a logical conclusion; but it was wrong. They didn't understand that God's ways are often inscrutable. In this passage Paul give examples from the OT that illustrated how God often did things that were beyond human comprehension.

God's inscrutable ways with the Jewish people. (Romans 11:1-10)

At the end of chapter 10 Paul described Israel as “a disobedient and obstinate people.” In chapter 11 Paul argues that just because they had largely rejected God, He had not rejected them. As he has done several times in Romans, Paul introduces a new train of thought with a question.

1 I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

For the ninth time in Romans Paul forcefully answers a question with the expression “May it never be!” Paul basically says, “My salvation is evidence that God is still committed to working among the Jewish people. I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.” Paul himself had been “a disobedient and obstinate person”; in 1 Timothy 1 he described himself as “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor.” And yet God had pursued him and drawn him to Himself. Notice the conclusion in verse 2:

2 God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 3 “Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.”

God “foreknew” the nation of Israel in the sense that He knew them ahead of time; this is synonymous with saying that God “chose” the nation of Israel (see Amos 3:2 - “You only have I known/chosen among all the families of the earth.”). Out of all the peoples on the earth, God simply chose to accomplish His purposes through the Jewish people. God didn’t choose them because they were the greatest or the most virtuous; God simply chose them.

By saying, “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew,” Paul is emphasizing that since God’s choice of the Jewish people preceded any obedience they might have, He hasn’t rejected the Jewish people because of any disobedience. Even though God disciplined Israel severely on many occasions, He never rejected the Jewish people in any absolute sense.

In verse 2 Paul appeals to his readers’ knowledge of Elijah to illustrate his point. In 1 Kings 19 we read that the evil Queen Jezebel vowed to hunt down and kill Elijah within 24 hours. This threat sent Elijah into deep discouragement. He went into the wilderness, laid down under a tree and wanted to die. After God refreshed him with food and drink, Elijah pleaded with God (see 1 Kings 19:10): “Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.”

Elijah believed that he was the only person left alive on earth who had remained faithful to God. God’s reply to this claim is found in verse 4:

4 But what is the divine response to him? “I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

The fact of the matter was that God had kept 7,000 men faithful to Himself. Elijah's own pain and his own limited understanding had blinded him to the work God had been doing. Paul understood that God was doing something analogous in his day:

5 In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Just as God had preserved 7,000 men in Elijah's day, there was also a remnant in the first century. Paul emphasizes that the remnant existed "according to God's gracious choice." I think Paul still has in mind God choosing the Jewish people as a whole instead of individual persons. If God hadn't chosen to set His love on Israel, there might be no remnant whatsoever. Remember back in 9:13 Paul quoted from Malachi 1, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." There we saw that the only reason Jacob/Israel wasn't completely desolate like the land of Esau (Edom) was because God had chosen to set His love on Israel. Because He chose to accomplish His purposes through Israel, He spared her the destruction she deserved.

Paul seems to be saying something similar here in chapter 11: there is a remnant because of God's gracious choice, not because of the works of the law. Verse 6 basically means that by definition grace is a gift, not something based on works.

In verse 7 Paul returns to a theme he introduced earlier, namely, that Israel didn't obtain the righteousness she was seeking through the Law (see 9:31).

7 What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened;

Notice that Paul identifies two distinct groups within Israel: 1) those who were chosen (the ones who believed in Jesus and therefore obtained righteousness) and 2) "the rest" who were hardened. The subsequent Scriptures make clear that God is the one who did the hardening. If you are hardened you are insensitive and unresponsive to God.

The idea that **God** hardens people (or groups of people) is uncomfortable for us, isn't it? We would prefer to think that God only **softens** people's hearts. But Paul is picking up a distinct theme that runs throughout the Old Testament: There are times when God hardens people who reject Him and His ways.

Back in Romans 9:18 Paul mentioned Pharaoh as someone whom God had "hardened." No matter how many miracles Pharaoh witnessed, His heart was hard toward God. God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to demonstrate His power through the ten plagues and through His miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea (Ex. 7:3). It wasn't the case that Pharaoh really wanted to follow God, but God hardened his heart. No, when God hardened his heart, He was only confirming Pharaoh's unbelief and rage.

In verse 8 Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 29:4 (and partially Isaiah 29:10). The hardening he saw in his day mirrored the hardening in ancient Israel.

8 just as it is written,
“God gave them a spirit of stupor,
Eyes to see not and ears to hear not,
Down to this very day.”

Again, it's not that they really wanted to see and hear God but He wouldn't let them. Rather, because they would not look at Him or listen to Him, God confirmed them in their unbelief.

In verses 9 and 10 Paul quotes from Psalm 69:22-23 a passage in which David prayed for God to punish those who had persecuted him.

9 And David says,
“Let their table become a snare and a trap,
And a stumbling block and a retribution to them.
10 “Let their eyes be darkened to see not,
And bend their backs forever.”

Paul seems to be quoting this prayer of David's to suggest a parallel between what David prayed and what the people experienced in his day: God had darkened their eyes so that they wouldn't see the truth about Jesus. A hardening had taken place.

In this passage Paul has shown that God was at work in ways that went beyond human comprehension (as He had done throughout the history of Israel): on the one hand God preserved a remnant; on the other hand, He hardened others. In light of these themes, let's consider two implications, one an encouragement and the other a warning.

Two Implications:

An Encouragement: *God sometimes works in people's lives in ways that are imperceptible to us.*

This truth flows from the account of Elijah that Paul referenced in verses 2 through 4. Elijah thought that he was the only follower of God in Israel; God's reply was, “Actually, I have kept for Myself 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” God wanted Elijah to know that **He** had done this work of preserving their faithfulness. Paul wanted the Romans to know that “in the same way” God had graciously preserved a remnant “at the present time.” Paul didn't want the Romans to make the same mistake Elijah made; he didn't want them to look around at the widespread unbelief among the Jews and conclude that God wasn't at work.

In Elijah's day and in Paul's day God's work in the lives of people was inscrutable - beyond the scrutiny of humans. In both cases they were wrong to conclude that God had rejected His people - that they were too far gone and that God was done working in

their midst. God is a God who keeps His Word. God is a God who works imperceptibly in the lives of peoples.

The application is NOT, "Let's be optimistic because sometimes things work out." The issue isn't whether or not we're optimistic people; believe it or not, **we** are not the issue. The issue is whether or not God is gracious and whether or not God is at work in ways that go beyond our scrutiny.

The application involves trusting God even when we can't see what He is doing. You and I see the behavior of other people; we hear the words of other people. But we don't see what God is doing in the human heart. We need to be careful to not pronounce, "God isn't at work in in that person's life. . ."

This morning you might be discouraged about a person or circumstance. As far as you can tell, God hasn't done what obviously needs to be done in that life or situation. Today's passage suggests that in such situations we keep trusting God anyway. God works in ways that are often imperceptible to us. Obviously there is no guarantee that God will do what we want (what we believe to be His will); but God is worthy of our trust.

A Warning: *God sometimes "hardens" those who refuse Him and His will.*

I want to be careful not to say *more* than Scripture says about God "hardening" people; but neither do I want to say less than Scripture. There are times when God hardens people who refuse Him and His will. In today's passage Paul showed that God had hardened people throughout history: the children of Israel in Deuteronomy (1500 b.c.), David's enemies (1000 b.c.), the Jewish nation in Exile in Isaiah's day (800 b.c.), and the Jewish people in Paul's day (first century a.d.). In Romans 1 Paul raises this issue when he wrote that in times past God "gave [people] over . . . to impurity. . .to degrading passions. . .to a depraved mind" (1:24, 26, 28).

God's hardening is a theological category that serves as a warning. The idea of God hardening those who refuse Him is consistent with the principle that God ultimately gives people what they really want. Everybody who wants a right standing before God through faith in Jesus Christ will be saved. Those who do not want what God offers in Jesus will not receive it. I've always appreciated Dallas Willard's perspective about this. In *Renovation of the Heart* (p. 59) he writes this about the "ruined soul" (one who hasn't been transformed by God):

"We should be very sure that the ruined soul is not one who has missed a few more or less important theological points and will flunk a theological examination at the end of life. Hell is not an "oops!" or a slip. One does not miss heaven by a hair, but *by constant effort to avoid and escape God.*"

We pray for people - that God would open their eyes and show them how foolish it is to run away from God. We share Christ with people because "faith comes from hearing" the message about Christ (Romans 10:17). All the while we are mindful that ultimately God gives people what they really want.

Of course this doesn't mean that we know when God has hardened someone. It is beyond our scrutiny to know for sure. Sometimes it's obvious that a person's heart is hardened, but we can't say whether or not God has done this hardening. We can't say whether or not that hardening is permanent or temporary. It's not our place to make pronouncements about God's hardening in people's lives.

If anything, this category serves as a warning about rejecting God and His ways. If you are not yet a believer in Jesus, I would urge you to continue hearing and learning about Jesus. I'd even encourage you to pray/talk with God, inviting Him to give you faith to believe. Praying may sound like a strange thing to do if you aren't sure you believe in God. . . . qualify your prayers in any way you want, but be open to God. I mainly want to warn you against drifting to a place of settled unbelief and hardness toward God. That's a very dangerous place spiritually.

This theological category of hardening also suggests an application for those who are already believers. If hardness of heart characterizes those who don't know God, those who do know God should have hearts that are soft - responsive and receptive to whatever God wants. I would simply ask whether there is an area of your life in which you have become hardened. Is there an area of your life where you're not even trying to be obedient anymore? Or is there a situation that you know displeases God, but you've just made peace with it?

We're never told that God hardens believers; to the contrary, He desires to keep our hearts soft. But we have a responsibility to turn from our sin/hardness and invite God to do His work in our lives. In Ephesians 4 Paul speaks of unbelievers who have "hardness of heart" and who have "become callous" and then tells the believers in Ephesus, "But you did not learn Christ in this way." He tells them to lay aside the old way of life and put on the new. The clear implication is that we shouldn't settle for hearts that are callous and hardened in any way.