

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part thirty-one

Sunday, June 16th, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2140

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES AND WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Romans 11:24-36 - "For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. [25] Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. [26] 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"; [27] "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." [28] As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. [29] For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. [30] Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, [31] so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. [32] For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. [33] Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! [34] "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" [35] "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" [36] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

Today we are finishing this wonderfully complex section of the book of Romans. Chapters nine through eleven show us the sweep of the Bible from Abraham onwards to today's newspaper. And God means for us to view His sovereign work with an eye to His glory and greatness and mercy. In fact, that's exactly the way Paul will pray his way out of these incredible chapters. They end, as you'll see in a few minutes, with nothing but adoration and doxology.

1) **PAUL TELLS US AGAIN THAT ISRAEL'S BLINDNESS TO THE TRUTH IS THE RESULT OF THE JUDGMENT OF GOD**

Romans 11:25a - "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel...." And, to remove all doubt as to the *cause* of this "*partial hardening*" Paul earmarked its *source* in **Romans 11:8** - "...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.'"

And Paul gave other dramatic examples of God's hardening work in the person of *Pharaoh* in **Romans 9:17**. The *process* of this judgment of God is that of *turning people over to their own stubbornness*. He grants them their wish. He shuts their eyes to the truth they pretended not to see.

So we're reminded quite forcefully that if grace is a wonderful thing to *receive*, it's a terrible thing to *spurn*. I urge you never to do that with the truth you hear and recognize. I urge you to always *bend instantly* in the direction of the voice of God. Never pretend you don't hear or know when deep down inside you really do. God is loving and gracious, true enough. But He refuses with the explosive passion of a thousand atomic bombs to be *toyed* with. If you *pretend* spiritual ignorance you will *end up* with spiritual ignorance.

2) **THIS JUDGMENT OF GOD UPON THE JEWS IS PARTIAL AND TEMPORARY**

Romans 11:25b - 26a - "...I want you to understand 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...."

Because Paul has already explained all of this, he only mentions it here. But he feels it is worth one more look. And the "*mystery*", as he calls it in **verse 25** is that God used the rebellion of the Jews to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. And, in incredible sovereign dexterity, He will then use the conversion of the Gentiles to arouse a jealousy for God in the Jews.

The reason Paul calls this a mystery is no one, apart from the disclosure of divine revelation, would think there was any divine plan in the failure of the Jews. And no one would think God would use the salvation of the Gentiles to supernaturally recall Israel to Himself.

Now, we haven't seen all of this plan unfold yet. We've only seen *parts* of its completion. We've seen the rebellion of the Jews - especially in its *ultimate* manifestation - the rejection of Jesus Christ, their promised Messiah. There has never been a more blatant turning away from the grace of God than this. This was Israel's worst moment.

There were striking consequences to this rejection. Paul said Israel was *hardened* until the *“fullness of the Gentiles has come in”*(11:26). Jesus, in the parable of the tenants who killed the son of the owner, summed it up with these words: **Matthew 21:40-43** - *“When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”* [41] They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.’ [42] Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? [43] Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be *taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.*”

This is exactly what Paul means in our Romans text when he says, in **Romans 11:28a** - *As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake....*”, or, **Romans 11:30** - *“....Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience....”* God has sovereignly, *mysteriously*, used the rejection of the majority of the Jews to bring gospel grace to the nations, the Gentiles.

But there’s more. Just as God used the *rebellion* of the Jews to bring grace to the Gentiles, He will use the *mercy* shown to the Gentiles to spiritually awaken the hearts of the Jews. This is what Paul describes in **Romans 11:26-27** - *“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’; [27] ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”*

Certainly there is some mystery here. We don’t know all we would like. But some things seem clear from the context of these verses:

First, Paul is dealing with both Jews and Gentiles in a *corporate* sense rather than an *individual* sense. I don’t know that when Paul says *“all Israel will be saved”*(26) he means *every single Jew* on earth anymore than when he talks about the salvation of the *Gentiles* he means every single Gentile on earth - *“....salvation has come to the Gentiles”*(11). But certainly he means the *nation* of Israel, taken generally, will have a massive spiritual awakening - a genuine national turning to God.

Second, I think the context makes clear that these Jews will be saved in exactly the same way we have all been saved - **Romans 11:26b-27** - *“.... ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob’; [27] ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”* God does not have *two* plans or streams of salvation. He only saves through Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah and Redeemer of the world. And, if words mean anything at all, Jesus (who is the *“Deliverer”* to whom these prophetic words of Isaiah point) will *“banish ungodliness”* and *“take away their sins”* just as He has done with you and me.

Third, while Paul is almost silent on this point, other texts seem to indicate that this salvation of Israel will take place suddenly and drastically at a crisis point in history yet to come. The only real clue we get in this passage is that Israel will be saved when the *“time of the Gentiles has come in”*(25). But other passages offer more detail:

Zechariah 12:10 - *“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.”*

Isaiah 66:8 - *“Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labor she brought forth her children.”*

Notice the prophet struggling with the concept of such a revival happening *“in one moment.”* *“Who has heard of such a thing,”* he says. Jesus gives another clue as to the timing of this event:

Matthew 23:39 - *“For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ”*

This is all we have time to consider at this point. But you can see from the words of Paul and the prophetic context of other Scriptures that there is yet to come this dramatic, sudden, corporate turning to Jesus Christ on the part of the nation of Israel.

3) **BOTH JEWS AND GENTILES IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH MUST VIEW THEIR PLACE VIS-A-VIS THE OTHER**

This is a profound truth. Jewish and Gentiles believers must view their place in Christ *in relation* to the other. This will *kill pride* in Gentiles and *give hope* to Jews - **Romans 11:28-32** - “As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. [29] For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. [30] Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, [31] so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. [32] For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”

Regarding the *gospel*, says Paul, Jewish unbelievers are “*enemies*” of God. And we’re instantly reminded that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ. And if this is true, even of the “*natural branches*,” how much *more* is it true of the nations of the earth. When Jesus is rejected God is rejected. This is what Jesus meant when, speaking to the Jews, He said: “**If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me**” (John 8:42).

But they are not *just* enemies. Paul says they are enemies “*for your* [Gentiles] *sake*.” (28). God is using their rejection of Christ to spread grace to the Gentiles. God is sovereign when people *accept* Him and He is still sovereign when people *reject* Him.

Yet the Jews are still those called through Abraham. God has not changed His mind about honoring those who follow in the faith of Abraham. That covenant of faith still stands. Paul says this work of God is an “*irrevocable*” work (29). And if Jews don’t continue in unbelief, they will be “*grafted in again*” (23).

4) THE ONLY WAY TRUE WORSHIP IS BORN

Romans 11:33-36 - “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! [34] ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ [35] ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ [36] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

This passage ought to surprise us. After the most polemic three chapters in the whole letter Paul is staggering with an overflow of heart-pounding worship. And doesn’t that seem strange to us? It’s not the *music* that has moved his heart. He’s not in a church service. As his quill has been scratching out his thoughts on the works of God in history he has to suddenly catch his breath. His *mind* has overflowed into his *heart*.

What do you hear in that first word - “*Oh!*”? It’s not really a word at all. There is no meaning attached to it all by itself. It doesn’t describe anything specific. It’s really the expression of something *deeply felt*. You see the Grand Canyon. You are stunned at the sight of an accident. You suddenly catch the meaning of something that puzzled you. In each case your unguarded response is “*Oh!*”

“*Oh*” is your emotions trying to catch their breath. It’s your mind stretched beyond what it can properly digest. It’s your soul pushing up through the soil. And then Paul says, “**Oh.... the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!**”(33).

The only other word I want to spend time on is that word “*depth*.” As Paul force-feeds his mind with these deep, involved truths about God’s mercy and severity his first descriptive word is “*depth*.” This is something that goes *way down*. Like a deep chasm - one you can only see so far down and then it loses itself in darkness - this is way beyond your perception.

What this means for you and me is our knowledge and delight and discovery in God is eternally *incremental*. We never reach the bottom of His eternal depth. For all eternity we will never stop *discovering* God. There will never come an end of *new* discovery and joy in Him.

Sam Storms in his great little book, “*Signs of the Spirit*,” puts it like this: “**Whatever joy we experience in heaven will forever grow. Whatever pleasures we feel will forever deepen. We will never fully and finally arrive, as if once we have tasted such sweet delights we will have exhausted their capacity to satisfy our souls. It will only get better, forever. It will only taste sweeter, forever. It will only appear more beautiful, forever. With each joyful encounter we will have touched only a small measure of an even greater, perpetual, infinite, and eternal increase!**”

But I think Paul means something more than that. And this is how I want to close this section of the letter with an application to *worship*. I think Paul used the word “*depth*” to underscore the idea of a *foundation*. I mean, he

could have, as he did in other places, talked about the **height** of God's wisdom and knowledge. But this time he specifically chose "**depth.**" And I think there's a reason.

Our worship of God can't **thrive** for long - perhaps it can't even **survive** - without this deep, deep, foundation under it. **Worship is born in rich, true, continuous meditation on God and His works.** You can't just work it up. It **ends** in the emotions - at least it **should** - but it doesn't **start** there.

Here's the foundation of worship: **Romans 11:36** - "**For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.**" This isn't just some kind of benediction. It's a description of your universe. It's a description of the godly life. It's the musings of a mind that orients all its parts to their proper center.