

## HUMBLY REJOICE IN GOD'S MYSTERY AND MERCY

(SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2013)

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**Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 59; Rom. 11:25-32

### Introduction

Unbelievers will sometimes challenge Scripture and the Christian faith with the reality of disagreement among Christians concerning Scripture. It is indeed sadly the case that there are some significant disagreements even among those who believe that Scripture is the inspired and infallible Word of God.

The unbeliever, though, who uses this as an argument that the Bible cannot be the Word of God is missing what even Scripture says. Recall some of the final words of the Apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:15-16.

**2Pet. 3:15** and consider *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, **16** as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures.

Listen also to the good words found in the Westminster Confession of Faith in the opening section on Scripture.

7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Pastor Alister Begg has rightfully said, “The main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things.”<sup>1</sup>

Disagreement among Christians is not a good thing, of course, but it should also not lead you to despair over reading and understanding the Bible. The reality of disagreement points to the continued need for Christians to prayerfully and passionately seek to understand the Word of God.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/387751.Alistair\\_Begg](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/387751.Alistair_Begg)

**2Tim. 3:14** But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*,

I say this by way of introduction to the wonderful passage we consider today from Romans 11. This is an important passage and yet as we look at the words of Romans 11:26 there is significant disagreement in the details of the phrase, “And so all Israel shall be saved.” However, the disagreement though significant doesn’t mean that this passage should be handled like a hot potato or armed hand grenade. This passage has been written specifically for our understanding.

This passage is a call to continued humility. Paul writes the words we consider so that we are not wise in our own opinion.

This passage is given to help us understand more concerning God’s plan of salvation and its fulfillment among Jews and Gentiles, what can be called the mystery of how God’s salvation is given and spread.

This passage highlights the mercy of God to those who are in no way deserving of His mercy, both Jews and Gentiles.

### **Humbly rejoice in God’s mystery and mercy.**

#### **1. ALL ISRAEL SHALL BE SAVED, vv. 25-27**

**Rom. 11:25** For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. **26** And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: *“The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; 27 For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.”*

The verses we consider today, verses 25-27, emphasize some of the same points we observed in verses 16-24. Paul in verses 16-24 was especially addressing the Gentiles in the congregation in Rome. As they considered the judgment that had come upon many Jews, Paul warned his Gentile audience to not be haughty but fear. Earlier he commanded, do not boast against the branches. I emphasized what I believe is the central command of verses 16-24, **consider the goodness and severity of God.**

Beginning with verse 25, I think we can say that Paul is still focused on giving important instruction that especially Gentiles in Rome must understand. There is a slight change in that as I noted in our last study, Paul used singular rather than plural pronouns and verbs. Here in verse 25, the pronoun **you** is plural. Much attention obviously is focused on verse 26 which we

will soon consider, but it is important to understand why Paul shares the great truth of verse 26. Verse 25 presents the important background. What do we see from verse 25?

Paul writes so that his readers will not be ignorant of a mystery. Such ignorance could lead to pride.

So what we can say even without going further is that Paul is writing here to keep you from ignorance and pride concerning your place in God's kingdom. This takes nothing away from the glory of this passage, but we have to keep in mind Paul has a very specific purpose in these verses.

The word mystery is used at the end of the book of Romans. It is also a word used in the book of Colossians. Let me share a good definition from the *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*.

... "mystery" here signifies the disclosure of truth to which the Scripture already bears witness. In other words, the knowledge of a "mystery" entails insight into the message of Scripture, which, although present, formerly was hidden and unknown.<sup>2</sup>

In Colossians, Paul talked about the mystery in terms of how the Gentiles would share in the glory of Jesus Christ. This is something that was taught in the OT, but not clearly understood until the time of Christ and his sending of His apostles to all the nations. Here the word mystery does not have exactly the same meaning but there is a connection. What is the mystery that Paul explains here?

The mystery is that blindness in part or a partial hardness has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved.<sup>3</sup>

Here in this statement Paul makes an important point about the gospel in relationship to Jews and Gentiles. A proper understanding of this mystery should keep us from pride. Paul has already reminded Gentiles that we have been grafted into the one olive tree which includes all God's elect in the Old Covenant and New Covenant. We don't support the roots, but we are supported by the roots.

Israel because of her unbelief has been judged very severely. Consider the severity of God. But this judgment does not mean that all of the Jewish people have been cut off or that Israel has stumbled to the point of entirely being fallen.

The blindness or hardness is partial. This doesn't just mean a little bit but rather that the blindness is not absolute. There is a remnant and there always will be a remnant of Jews

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<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 672. The commentary on Romans was written by Mark A. Seifrid.

<sup>3</sup> Moo, 716.

according to the election of grace. This we see is the record of history. Why is it that seemingly so few Jews have come to saving faith in Christ? From the perspective of this passage we can say this is due to the blindness or hardness that has come on them. We also can see a remnant of believing Jews.

This revelation is meant to humble us as we consider the working of God in terms of His sovereign mercy and judgment. Paul is reminding especially the Gentiles in Rome that their salvation is connected both with God's judgment of Israel and also the salvation of at least some of the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup>

Now notice the expression in verse 25, **until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in**. Here is one of the points of disagreement among those who take Scripture seriously. Does the word **until** emphasize that there will be a change after the fullness of the Gentiles is brought in? Or does this expression indicate that there will be a partial hardening of the Jewish people until the end and the return of Christ?

This is a difficult question. Examples in Scripture can be found for both understandings.

Matthew 24:38 uses the word **until** with the sense of "right up to," right unto the end.

**Matt. 24:38** For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark,

But there are examples where the word **until** notes a change that will take place when a certain point is reached.

**Luke 4:13** ¶ Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him **until an opportune time**.

There are a good number of other passages where until marks a change in a situation.<sup>5</sup>

To be honest, I wrestle with what is the better interpretation. Those who hold to the Reformed faith have also wrestled with this passage and there is a division of answers.

Part of the question is whether Paul contrasts the present state of the Jewish people and God's work of sovereign grace among them with a greater outward expression of faith among the Jewish people for the future. For example verse 12.

**12** Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! (**Note the word fullness also then in verse 25**).

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Merkle, "Romans 11 and the Future of Ethnic Israel," JETS 43/4 (December 2000), 719-720.

<sup>5</sup> See Moo, 717. He gives a good number of examples supporting the idea that until marks a change in situation. This is also the understanding of R. C. Sproul.

And verse 15.

**15** For if their being cast away *is* the reconciling of the world, what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead?

Does Paul contrast the idea of a small remnant that we see in verse 5 with a larger number of Jews who at some time in the future will come to embrace the gospel? I see both an emphasis on the present witness as well as *suggestions* of a greater future in this chapter.

Iain Murray in his book, *The Puritan Hope*, shows how many of the Puritans understood verse 25 to mean that at some time in the future, when a great blessing had come to the Gentiles, God would bring in an even greater number of the Jewish people than witnessed throughout most of redemptive history. This view doesn't have to mean that Jesus is going to return right after this event but only that at some point we should expect to see a greater number of Jews come to saving faith as the blindness in part is removed. This is the my best understanding of this passage.

A full justification of this interpretation is beyond the scope of this message. What we must understand again is that God is giving here a reason why you must be humble. You have not deserved in anyway the mercy we have been shown. God has brought a judgment on unbelieving Jews so that the gospel could go to the nations. This is indeed a mystery – something that we can see glimpses of in the OT Scriptures but something that Paul had to share with the first readers of this gospel and with us so that we could have a much greater understanding.

As believers there is no place for us boasting against unbelieving Jews. Like Paul we should be filled with sorrow over the spiritual blindness that has gripped most Jewish people. But there is reason to be filled with true joy and hope. God is doing a work among all nations and there is still specific hope given for the Jewish people.

Verse 26 then states, “**And so all Israel will be saved.**” The ESV has what I think is a better translation. “**And in this way all Israel will be saved.**”

It is here that we also come to a variety of understandings about the meaning of the word Israel and what exactly it means that “all Israel” will be saved.

Some like John Calvin and others believed that in verse 26, Israel was to be understood as the church composed of Jews and Gentiles.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There are places where this language is used. Galatians 6:16 is one example of this, I believe. Some deny that Paul is using *kai* in an epexegetical way here. Some want to distinguish the church and Israel. I don't think this separation is valid.

However, given the context of Romans 9-11, it is best to understand that Israel is not referring to the church but referring to ethnic Jews. This is the how the word Israel is used in all the other appearances in Romans 9-11.

So then we have to ask, is Paul talking about the full number of elect Jews throughout history or a great mass of Jewish people who are saved at a future point such that the expression **all Israel** can be used?

This is a difficult question. The answer given tends to be reflective of one's larger system of eschatology, but there are details from Romans 11 that must be considered. Paul in Romans 11 both speaks of the present remnant and God's continued work beyond his own life. I favor the understanding here is that Paul is talking about the full number of elect Jews who are brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ in the manner that is described in Romans 11. But with this I would also suggest we have reason that God in the future will bring a much greater number of Jews to saving faith.

The Jewish people who were mostly in a state of rebellion could only be saved through faith in Messiah. How would this happen? Well, Paul gives we might say two answers which beautifully fit together.

**The salvation of the full number of the elect comes through God's sovereign work of grace.** We see this emphasized throughout Romans 9-11. Paul quotes again from the book of Isaiah in verse 26 and 27 to show God's sovereign initiative in bringing rebellious Jews to saving faith in Christ.

As we have noted, Paul most often turns to the book of Isaiah in Romans. It is interesting to look at the quotations that Paul cites from the book of Isaiah. The quotations that he uses earlier in chapters 10 and 11 emphasize the rebellion and disobedience of Israel and the judgment that God brought to them. Here at the end of Romans 11, Paul quotes from Isaiah to speak of God's gracious work of salvation.

Isaiah 59 begins with a great statement of God's sovereign power in contrast with the rebellion of the Jewish people. This is similar to what we see in Romans 9-11.

**Is. 59:1** Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear.

**2** But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden *His* face from you, So that He will not hear.

Verse 26 which comes from Isaiah 59:20 speaks of a Redeemer coming out of Zion. Interestingly in Isaiah 59:20 the language is a Redeemer will come to Zion. This difference may be significant in that Paul is making the point that Israel in her unbelief is in a state of exile. A Redeemer must come out of Zion and bring salvation.<sup>7</sup> This Redeemer is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look at the next phrase. **He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob.** Salvation will come through God's sovereign initiative. Verse 27 which is taken both from Isaiah 59 and Isaiah 27:9 emphasizes God's gracious work of forgiveness.

So how will God bring salvation to all Israel? It will be through the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.

From what we might call the human perspective, all of Israel will be saved as we read in verses 11 and 14. Israel is provoked to jealousy in seeing the blessings of the gospel among the Gentiles. All Israel would be saved through the faithful witness of the Apostle Paul and countless others that God would and will raise up to bring the gospel to the Jewish people.

Walt Chantry has a good friend, Baruch Maoz. Others in this congregation know this faithful servant of God. He was born in the US but later moved to Israel when he was 10. He was converted to Christ while serving in the Israeli army in 1963. He has now served the Lord in Israel as a pastor, theologian, and writer for about 50 years. The congregation he helped establish in Israel has some 300 people. Though retired from active pastoral work, he is serving the Lord in another congregation as he seeks to win many of his own people.<sup>8</sup> God is using his faithful witness, I believe, as part of his great work of calling in the full number of elect of Jewish people.

Now some rightfully asked the question, how can the salvation of elect Jews be rightfully called a mystery? Isn't that light saying a bachelor is an unmarried man. Certainly all the elect Jews will be saved.

I think what we are to understand in terms of the mystery is not simply that elect Jews will be saved but that there is an interrelationship of Jews and Gentiles in the working of God's plan. This we see developed throughout this chapter and summarized I think especially in verse 30 that we will consider next week Lord willing. The mystery also relates to the unfolding of God's plan involving the present hardness that I believe will one day be removed so as to bring even greater blessing.

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<sup>7</sup> *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 674.

<sup>8</sup> <http://themaozweb.com/cms/page/baruch>

The OT looked forward to the day when the glorious light given to Israel would be shared among the nations. How this would be accomplished is part of the mystery that is explained in Romans 11.

Judgment comes upon Israel for her unbelief. This judgment is expressed in different terms in Romans 11 including the partial hardening or blindness that has come upon Israel.

As a result the gospel is brought to the Gentiles and the elect Gentiles are saved. God then uses this salvation of the Gentiles to stir up the elect remnant of the Jews. This elect Jewish remnant also then accepts Jesus Christ by faith.<sup>9</sup>

In this plan I think we have good reason to believe that the small remnant of Jews will in the working of God's sovereign grace become a much larger number that will bring an even greater blessing to all of God's covenant people.

There are even elements of this in the OT, but the full understanding of this required revelation that God delivered here through the Apostle Paul.

## CONCLUSION

### **Humbly rejoice in God's mystery and mercy.**

Consider Paul's attitude to unbelief and rebellion. Paul stands on God's sovereignty. He also presents man's responsibility. In no way does he try to downplay the reality of unbelief. Paul has great sorrow and continual grief in his heart. He prays for the salvation of his own people.

This must also be our attitude and response to sin and rebellion of those who we know and love.

This is the attitude we want to show to the all the lost. We exalt in the mercy of God. We proclaim and teach the sovereign justice of God.

Robert Leighton a great Scottish preacher in the 17<sup>th</sup> century declared in a sermon he preached from Isaiah 60:1-3 in January, 1642, "They forget a main point of the Church's glory, who pray not daily for the conversion of the Jews."<sup>10</sup>

I have quoted in a similar way from the answer of the Larger Catechism dealing with what we pray for when we ask of God, Thy kingdom com.

In the second petition (which is, *Thy kingdom come*), acknowledging ourselves and all mankind to be by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, **we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated**

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from William Hendriksen, "And So All Israel Shall Be Saved." (1945)

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 75.



**throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in...**

As we turn our attention to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, I believe there are important connections that we make with Romans 11.

In the meal we celebrate we remember the past history of God's deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. This deliverance pointed to the even greater deliverance that would be found in the blood of Christ.

In our celebration of the Lord's Supper we humbly confess we are unworthy to receive the mercy of God, we are unworthy to be grafted into the Olive Tree, but how thankful we who were wild olive branches have been grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree.

In our celebration let us focus our attention to the great power of our Lord and the great price He paid in turning away our ungodliness and taking away our sins. Our God is mighty to save. The Lord Jesus Christ is indeed the Mighty God, but He saved us not merely through His power but through His suffering and death.

We celebrate this great meal until our Lord returns in expectation that our Deliverer will continue to show His great mercy to many Jews and Gentiles for the glory of His name.

**Prayer**

**Hymn: 364**

### **Benediction – Hebrews 12:1-3**

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.