



GOD'S UNSEARCHABLE JUDGMENTS

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 11:1-36

22nd Message

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Anyone who wants to submit to Christ's love and lordship can come to the Savior. That is the thrust of the opening eight chapters of the book of Romans. As far as the good news of the gospel is concerned, racial, social, cultural, or indeed any kinds of differences between people are irrelevant. Anyone can come to Christ.

Paul's concern in chapters 9-11 centers on the question, What about Israel's unbelief? What about this uniquely privileged group of people whom God chose? Does God have a plan that ultimately includes Israel? The answer is yes, God does indeed have a plan for the nation.

The apostle summarizes this entire issue in chapter 11. The argument revolves around the author's two rhetorical questions, both of which he responds to with an unequivocal "No." The first question is, "God has not rejected His people, has He?" (Rom 11:1). One might expect that since they rejected God that God would reject them. But no. God has not abandoned them. Their rejection is only partial; a remnant remains.

Paul's second question is: "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall did they?" (Rom 11:11). He is asking, Does God no longer have a purpose for the nation of Israel? Again, his answer is a very emphatic "No." Israel's fall is not final; it is only temporary. Her fall has resulted in unexpected blessings: God is going to bring even more blessing. John Stott summarizes: "There is still an Israelite remnant in the present and there will be an Israelite recovery in the future."¹

Let's look more closely at the apostle's first question:

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. 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? "Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, they have torn down Thine altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; 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." And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever." (Rom 11:1-10, NASB)

Paul answers his own question and then defends his answer with sweeping evidence.

The first piece of evidence is Paul's own conversion. He himself is living proof of his argument. And what an example he was! Once he was a bloodthirsty enemy of the church. He hated Christians and Christ. He probably had heard Jesus preach and regarded him as a fraud. But, when Paul was on his way to Damascus with letters giving him permission to put Christians in prison, the sovereign God stopped him in his tracks and brought him, kicking and screaming, into the kingdom. Christians had such a low opinion of Paul that, even after his conversion, only Barnabas, the peacemaker par excellence, would accept him. Paul was the most unlikely candidate for the kingdom. He could never get over God's mercy and always marveled at the wonder of grace. He was living proof that God isn't through with the Jews.

Next, Paul lists biblical evidence, namely, the situation in Israel during the time of Elijah, the eighth century prophet. Elijah prophesied during a time of great apostasy in the land. Ahab was king at the time, and the notorious Jezebel was his wife. Ahab had married into the Phoenician royal house in order to establish an alliance with Phoenicia, and Jezebel came over into Israel, carrying all of her gods. The result was that the whole nation fell into Baal worship, so much so that that became the religion of the land.

Then Elijah had his classic shootout with the prophets of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel, and won a decisive victory. Hearing that Jezebel wanted him dead, he took refuge in a cave at Mount Horeb. There he sang the blues to God: "They have killed your prophets and have torn down your altars. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But God said that Elijah's arithmetic was lacking: "You aren't the only one left," God assured him. "I have 7,000 who have not bowed to Baal." During Israel's deepest spiritual failing there were 7,000 people whose hearts were tender toward God.

Now, says Paul, just as in Elijah's day when there was a remnant of 7,000, so also there was in Paul's day a remnant chosen by grace. It was probably a sizeable

number. Soon, James would tell Paul that there were thousands of believing Jews (Acts 21). This is where we stand at the present time as well. Some Jews have hard hearts, while others are more receptive to the things of Christ. We have worshiping Jews here among us who have acknowledged Christ as their Messiah. Paul is saying that there are more Jews than we imagine who are part of this believing remnant. They are a reminder that God has not rejected Israel.

Why do the rest remain in unbelief? Paul explains that they have been hardened because they persist in thinking that they can make themselves righteous through good works. Some of the quotations that Paul uses from Isaiah and Psalms sound as though God indiscriminately hardens hearts, but a reading of the circumstances in which those words were written makes it clear that it was only after people repeatedly hardened their hearts that God finally hardened their hearts. This is the judicial result of a long-term hardening of the heart. The same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay. In verse 8 the apostle combines two quotes from Deuteronomy 29:2 and Isaiah 29:10. Isaiah was speaking to people who had turned their backs on God and worshipped the Baals. The verses that precede that say, "Blind yourselves and be blind." So, God says, keep on blinding yourselves to the truth and one of these days when you try to open your eyes you will discover that you can't see at all. That is the point.

The passage from Psalm 69, a familiar one that is quoted elsewhere in the New Testament, describes the persecution of a righteous person. David loved God with all his heart, and he loved the ark because it represented God's presence. He wanted to build a house for God but the people, his own wife included, ridiculed him. David prayed that God would vindicate him and that God's just judgment would fall on his enemies. So it is not a matter of God choosing some to be hard and some to be soft. Paul is saying that if you keep closing your heart to God's love, after a while you won't be able to open it up any more. This is serious business. Don't play games with God.

So the thrust of the apostle's argument here is that Israel's fall is not total, it is only partial. God has not rejected his people. A remnant remains.

Before we move on I want us to pause and take an honest look at the state of our own hearts this morning. Is your heart soft toward God? If God wanted to communicate to you right now, would you hear him? Paul's word about hardening our hearts should be sobering to us all. If anyone continues to hear the truth and does not respond, the time may come when we will not be able to respond. It isn't our struggle or failure that will destroy us, but our indifference.

This brings us to Paul's second question.

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them

jealous. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? And if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches [i.e. the Jews]; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? (Rom 11:11-24)

It is clear that Israel's fall, which Paul has just explained, is not total; it is not final, either. In fact, it isn't a downward spiral at all. In God's merciful providence both Israel and the Gentiles will experience greater blessings than if Israel had never fallen.

There is a sequence of thought in these verses that is important to see.

The first element in that sequence is that as a result of Israel's fall, salvation has come to the gentiles. This is Paul's theological interpretation of the historical events he had witnessed. Following his conversion, he went right to the Jews with the gospel, going from synagogue to synagogue preaching the good news, but they threw him out. That is why he went to the gentiles. He discovered among them a hunger for truth and longing for God that his own people didn't have. The book of Acts records that on many occasions the rejection of the gospel by Jews led immediately to gentile conversions. On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas said to the Jews: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the gentiles" (Acts 13:46). This happened over and over again. Thus the apostle turns history into theology. John Stott comments, "implying that the first event took place with a

view to the second. God thus overruled the sin of Israel for the salvation of the gentiles.”²

The second element in this sequence of thought is that the salvation of the gentiles will make the Jews envious and provoke their conversion. It is God’s intention that the members of this new community be so alive, so full of Christ, so full of love that many unbelieving Jews will say to themselves, “What are we doing? These blessings were intended for us. They have something we want.” And thus many will wake up and be saved.

The picture that Paul uses is that of a cultivated olive tree, representing the nation of Israel. The tree was not bearing fruit, so in order to reinvigorate it the gardener grafted in a shoot from a wild olive tree, with the result that the tree began to bear fruit again. We gentiles, we wild olive branches, have been grafted into this holy tree. The exhortation is that we remain humble and dependent, realizing that we have no life in ourselves; we are merely branches. But, as we abide in the vine we live lives that bear fruit, radiating such reality that many unbelieving Jews will wake up and be saved. And there is a word of hope and promise to Jewish unbelievers. If those that were grafted in were cut off, then those that were cut off could be grafted in again. If God can engraft wild olive branches like you and me, how much more the natural branches?

God’s ultimate purpose is to save the world.

Finally, Paul assures us that there is a future salvation for Israel.

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.” “And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.” 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; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all. (Rom 11:25-32)

Paul is saying that God does have a purpose, still in the future, which involves Israel. There is a great debate as to whether God has a plan for Israel here on earth. Will Israel be returned to their land? Will they have a king? Will the temple be rebuilt? Will the priesthood be

reintroduced? Will sacrifices be reinstated? Some say that all of this is fulfilled in the church. There are good Christians on both sides of this issue. Some people believe that what Paul is saying is that right before the Lord comes back there will be a large influx of Jews into the church. I have to admit that I don’t know what God’s future plan for Israel is. But I do know that he has a plan.

God has a plan. We are not drifting through history. We are moving toward a day when our Lord Jesus will make everything right. Right now, he is drawing both Jews and gentiles into his kingdom. At some point he has a plan for Israel which he is going to fulfill, because of his covenant with the patriarchs. Then he is going to wrap everything up. We will lay down all of our feelings of sadness, our heaviness of heart, our despair over broken relationships, our depression over painful circumstances, our memories of past sin. John reminds us in Revelation: “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes.”

That is God’s promise to us. Things are not out of hand. He is in control of history, as he has always been. And even more, he is in control of your life

Knowing this we can worship with Paul.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

God is worthy of our praise. He is patient and merciful throughout the ages. His loyal love endures forever. He is faithful to keep his covenant. In spite of God’s people being stiff-necked, rebellious and obstinate, he has not turned his back on them. Though we are covenant breakers, God is a covenant keeper. His heart still longs for Jewish unbelievers to come back.

Do you think that God has had it with you? Think again! He is so much more patient than that. He is not like a man. Maybe you have neglected him for a long time and you think he doesn’t want anything to do with you, that he is sick and tired of your inconsistency. Think again! Just because you are a covenant breaker, don’t think he is. He is a covenant keeper, and he is continuing to keep his covenant with you.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 291.
2. Stott, 295.