

A COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 11:25-32

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²⁵ For I do not want you, brothers and sisters, 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; ²⁶ and so all Israel will be saved; 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." 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. 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. ³² For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

Beginning with chapter 9 of Romans, the Apostle Paul lays bare his heart, revealing great sorrow and anguish over Israel's rejection of the gospel and Christ. They are his own people, his fellow countrymen, the chosen people of God to whom belong the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple worship, the promises, and the patriarchs (Rom 9:4-5). From any perspective, they had it all! But was Israel's rejection of the Messiah permanent, or would God grant mercy on them in the future? It is in answer to this question that Paul now reveals the "mystery" of Israel's blindness; that is, in the mystery of the divine purpose it was necessary for Israel to stand outside the gospel for some time, and to experience that hostility to God which is characteristic of humankind in this age (Rom 5:10; 8:7), in order that the gospel might be offered to Gentiles as God's free grace to man.¹ But more importantly, Paul did not view the "mystery" as part of the gospel but rather as a solution to the puzzle of the gospel's reception. For while Gentiles were now being saved by their faith, Israel would someday receive God's mercy – through the salvation of Gentiles would result the salvation of all Israel. Thus Paul has provided

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16*, vol. 38B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Incorporated, 2002), 685.

eschatological insight in New Testament terms that satisfies Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel's salvation. While Paul gives no time period for the full unveiling of this "mystery", we can take great comfort in the certainty of God's plan, "for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29).

God's Plan of Salvation History

- I. God's plan to save Israel after the Gentiles is revealed as a mystery; indeed, the heart of Israel has been partially hardened until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, at which time all Israel will be saved (11:25-27).
 - A. God's plan of salvation history is revealed so that the Gentiles will not be proud of their new position (11:25a).
 - B. This plan of salvation history includes a partial hardening of Israel (11:25b).
 - C. Israel's partial hardening will continue until such time as the full number of the Gentiles has been saved (11:25c).
 - D. After the full number of the Gentiles has been saved, all Israel will be saved (11:26a).
 - E. All Israel will be saved by the Messiah who will come down from heaven and remove all the ungodliness from Israel (11:26b).
 - F. God's covenant with Israel will then be satisfied when He takes away their sins (11:27).
- II. The Gentiles have received God's mercy because of the enmity between Israel and the gospel, but Israel is beloved by God because of His irrevocable promises made to the fathers of Israel (11:28-29).
 - A. With respect to the gospel, Israel is God's enemy; but because of this enmity the Gentiles have received God's mercy (11:28a).
 - B. With respect to God's choice, Israel is beloved because of the promises made to the fathers of Israel (11:28b).
 - C. The promises made to the fathers of Israel are God's saving gifts and calling which can never be withdrawn (11:29).
- III. God's plan of salvation history requires all people to be held under disobedience so that He may show mercy to all people; to the Gentiles first, then to all Israel (11:30-32).
 - A. The Gentiles were once disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of Israel's disobedience (11:30).
 - B. Israel is now disobedient to God, but because of the mercy shown to the Gentiles, Israel will also be shown mercy by God (11:31).
 - C. God has chosen this plan of salvation history to enclose all (both Jews and Gentiles) in disobedience so that all might be shown mercy (11:32).

God's Plan of Salvation Revealed as a Mystery

25 The opening words of this verse show that Paul is beginning a new phase of his discussion which he began in verse 11. His preceding question was, "...[Israel] did not stumble into an irrevocable fall, did they?" In providing a more comprehensive answer to this question (his previous answer being a subtle "Absolutely not!"), Paul now reveals the "mystery" of God's plan of salvation history – that is, the destiny of Israel but not exclusive of the Gentiles. His opening phrase "I do not want you to be ignorant" is characteristically Pauline in situations where he is revealing a "mystery." This same expression appears in Romans 1:13, 1 Corinthians 10:1, 2 Corinthians 1:8, and 1 Thessalonians 4:13. For clarity, many modern English translations transform this Greek negative statement into a positive one such as "I want you to know" (cf. NLT, RSV). The word "mystery" is not used by Paul in the sense of some undisclosed secret, but rather of divine secrets now revealed by divine agency.² Usually the mystery involves an event or insight associated with the Messiah's second coming and the preaching of the gospel, but here and in 1 Corinthians 15:51 it refers to an event at the end of history.³ The text does not disclose when or how Paul received this revelation, but it seems likely that Paul understood it as a revelation given particularly to him to make known through Scripture (so Dunn, 678). In a

² The word μυστήριον ("mystery") occurs only 27 times in the New Testament. Not insignificantly, it occurs most often (20 times) in Paul's writings, since it is here that the mystery cults and Gnosticism are directly dealt with [Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1975), 3:503]. The most common meaning for μυστήριον ("mystery") in the Greco-Roman world would be in reference to the mystery cults ("the mysteries" – usually in plural); their cultic acts and symbols kept secret so that little is known about them today. Knowledge of the existence of these mysteries would have been widespread in Paul's day (see LSJ, MM, *TDNT* 4:803-8). Dunn comments that Paul, writing from Corinth, may have been well aware of the most famous of the Mysteries – that celebrated at Eleusis in Attica. The cult of Attis had been given official status at Rome under Claudius, and the mysteries of Isis were carried out both at Rome and near Corinth (Dunn, 678). However, in the context of Rom. 11:25, Paul shows no allusion to these types of mysteries, rather he is using exclusively Jewish apocalyptic language here (cf. Dan. 2:18-19, 27-30; for an exhaustive list of pertinent classic Jewish apocalyptic writings see Dunn, 679).

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996), 714.

broad sense there is agreement that the mystery relates to the restoration or salvation of Israel. However, one should not fail to see that the mystery also relates to the Gentiles in that the period in which salvation will be available to them will not last forever. Schreiner provides a threefold explanation of the mystery: (1) A part of Israel is hardened for a limited period of time, (2) the salvation of the Gentiles will precede the salvation of Israel, and (3) all Israel will eventually be saved.⁴ Because the salvation of the Gentiles precedes that of the Jews, an attitude of ethnic pride and exclusiveness was starting to form among the Gentiles. Paul breaks off his explanation of the mystery and warns his Gentile Christian readers not to become proud or arrogant with regard to their new position in salvation history.⁵

From verses 11-24 we see the hope that Paul has for his own people Israel. Verse 11:19 explains that the “branches [of the olive tree] were broken off so that [Gentiles] could be grafted in.” These branches are Israel; the natural branches of the olive tree whose root is the Abrahamic Covenant. Here Paul returns to the mystery and explains that this setting aside of Israel was only partial; that is, not all the branches were broken off, and it was only temporary. God’s plan of salvation history has always included a partial hardening of the Jews, and this hardening will continue until such time as the full number of Gentiles, a number known only to God, has received God’s blessing in salvation. Israel’s hardening could be rendered “refusal to believe.” That a “partial” hardening has occurred is more difficult to understand and could be

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 614.

⁵ We must remember here that historically, that is in the Old Testament, it was Israel’s God that Gentiles could approach through the Law; therefore, salvation for any was through Israel. Unfortunately, the Jews had long since placed themselves high upon a pedestal with respect to ethnic pride and exclusivity over non-Jews. Now God’s mercy on Gentiles is making way the path for salvation that would be the conduit through which God would show mercy and ultimately salvation to Israel. As Moo so ably explains, lest his Gentile Christian readers begin “boasting over Jews and Jewish Christians because of their assumption that they – the Gentiles – had ousted the Jews as the focus of God’s purposes in history” (Moo, 715), let them be forewarned (cf. Rom. 11:20-22).

interpreted in several different ways: (1) not all the people of Israel refused to believe, (2) the people of Israel have not absolutely refused to believe, (3) the fact that the people of Israel have refused to believe will not always last, or (4) the people of Israel will not always refuse to believe.⁶ While these varying interpretations are all true at some point, within the context of Romans 11 numerical quantities are primarily in view – the “remnant” of Israel in verse 5; “...the elect obtained it. The rest were hardened” in verse 7; and the “fullness of the Gentiles” here in verse 25. As such, it is clear that Paul is placing a numerical limitation on Israel’s hardening (so also Moo, 717).⁷ At some point in the future, the full number of Gentiles will be saved, signaling an end to Gentile priority in God’s salvation-historical plan.

26-27 The end of Gentile priority in God’s salvation-historical drama begins a new chapter for Israel. It is at this point that “all Israel” will be saved, or grafted back into the olive tree (cp. Rom. 11:23). But what is meant by “all Israel?” Does it refer to all Jews without exception who have ever lived? To the Jewish remnant who trust Christ for salvation? To Jews at the end of history who trust Christ for their salvation? The community of the elect, including both Jews and Gentiles? To the last of these questions, Paul has provided no indications that he has the Church in view here. He has used the term “Israel” ten times in Romans 9-11, and each use refers to ethnic Israel. This is clearly the meaning in verse 25, and Moo rightly observes that “a shift from this ethnic denotation to a purely religious one in v. 26a – despite the “all” – is unlikely “ (Moo, 721). To the remaining questions Paul turns to the Old Testament. Drawing on a fairly close quotation from the Septuagint (Paul paraphrases, as was common in ancient

⁶ Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1973), 11.25.

⁷ See also C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Commentary on Romans IX-XVI and Essays*, 10th ed., vol. 2, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1975; reprint, 2004), 575.

citations) Paul uses Isaiah 59:20-21: the remnant of Jacob who turn from sin will be saved by the coming of the new redeemer, when he puts his Spirit on them.⁸ The “deliverer” in view here is Christ, the deliverer of Israel at the time of the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. The conversion of Israel described in verses 26-27 is clearly at the second coming of Christ to reign as King. While the remnant of Israel, the 144,000, will be converted as first fruits to God in the first half of the Tribulation Period (cp. Rev 7:4-8; 14:4), it will not be until the very end that all Israel will be saved. Therefore, Paul thinks of the very end of the age as the point at which Israel will be “grafted in again.” Again drawing from Old Testament prophecy, Paul uses a blend of Jeremiah 31:33-34 and Isaiah 27:9 (from the Septuagint): God will re-establish his covenant with Israel, and nationally, as well as individually, their sins will be taken away. When that occurs, God’s special purposes with the Gentiles will be complete, their fullness being realized in the multitude of their saved, but their privileged place on the olive tree will have been lost, and they will once more be subordinated to Israel (cp. Isa 60:3, 5, 11-12, 16).

God’s Covenants Upheld

28 Paul now reiterates what he has expounded concerning Israel; that is, he does not regard God’s promises to ethnic Israel as canceled – only deferred (cf. Deut 4:25-31).⁹ In the interest of Gentile salvation, Israel (the “them” from verse 27) has been allowed to become hostile to the gospel (cf. 1 Thess. 2:14-16), but this does not change God’s electing purpose; that

⁸ The most significant difference from the Septuagint (LXX) is that Paul writes “from Zion” versus “for the sake of Zion.” Although a scribal alteration could have occurred here to fit the context of Paul’s discussion, it is more conceivable that Paul deliberately altered the Old Testament passage to continue his transformational argument; that is, he is “in the process of transforming – not merely taking up – the expectation of an eschatological pilgrimage of Gentiles to Zion” (Dunn, 682). Therefore, these Old Testament passages simply provide Paul with some justification for modification of Isa 59:20, passages which clearly had some importance for Paul.

⁹ Craig S. Keener and InterVarsity Press, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, vol. Ro 11:28 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

is, they are still especially beloved on behalf of the fathers, or patriarchs, to whom God's promises were originally made. The two clauses of verse 28 are parallel in structure:

"In regard to the gospel"	"enemies"	"for your sake"
"In regard to election"	"dearly beloved"	"for the sake of the fathers"

It should not be insisted that these two parallel clauses carry the same meaning, especially in the two "for" phrases. The first clause should be viewed with a sense of finality – i.e., the Jews are "enemies" *for* your [Gentile Christians] sake. The finality comes from God's hardening of Israel against the gospel in order that salvation could come to the Gentiles. It is final because this hardening will continue until the full number of Gentiles are saved, at which point the hardening will cease. The latter clause should be viewed with a causal sense – i.e., Israel is "dearly beloved" *because* of the fathers (so Moo, 731). That Israel is "beloved" because of the fathers does not imply the fathers did anything to merit God's love for them or their descendants. Rather, Paul's point here is that the significance of the fathers in God's plan of salvation is based on the promises He made to them (cf. Gal. 3 and Rom. 4).

29 The promises made to the Jewish fathers, like all of God's gifts and calling,¹⁰ are irrevocable; hence, they are certain of fulfillment whatever the present Jewish condition may be. Jamieson provides a comprehensive summary of Paul's thoughts:

By the "*calling* of God," in this case, is meant that sovereign act by which God, in the exercise of His free choice, "called" Abraham to be the father of a peculiar people; while "*the gifts* of God" here denote the articles of the covenant which God made with Abraham, and which constituted the real distinction between his and all other families of the earth. Both these, says the apostle, are irrevocable; and as the point for which he

¹⁰ The word κλησις ("call" or "calling") means *a call, calling, or invitation*. In classical Greek, it seldom refers to divine initiative but rather stems from the mystery religions (e.g. that of Isis). Since Greek society did not know the biblical concept of calling, it did not share our concept of vocation. It is used 8 times by Paul and almost always with the sense of divine initiative – the call that comes from God (BDAG, 549). The only exceptions to Paul's usage can be found in 1 Cor. 15:9, 1 Cor. 10:27, and three quotations from the LXX: Rom. 9:7, Rom. 9:25, and Rom. 9:26. Paul understands calling as the process by which God calls those, whom he has already elected and appointed, out of their bondage to this world, so that he may justify and sanctify them, and bring them into His service. This means that the call is a part of God's work of reconciliation and peace (Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 275).

refers to this at all is the *final destiny* of the Israelite nation, it is clear that *the perpetuity through all time of the Abrahamic covenant* is the thing here affirmed. And lest any should say that though Israel, *as a nation*, has no destiny at all under the Gospel, but as a people disappeared from the stage when the middle wall of partition was broken down, yet the Abrahamic covenant still endures in the *spiritual* seed of Abraham, made up of Jews and Gentiles in one undistinguished mass of redeemed men under the Gospel—the apostle, as if to preclude that supposition, expressly states that the very Israel who, as concerning the Gospel, are regarded as “enemies for the Gentiles’ sakes,” are “*beloved for the fathers’ sakes*”; and it is in proof of this that he adds, “For the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance.”¹¹

The Disobedience of Man and God’s Mercy

30-31 The fact that God’s calling is irreversible leads to a new perspective on the present disobedience of Israel. For just as the Gentiles once disobeyed God and have received God’s mercy through Israel’s disobedience, so now similarly Israel is disobedient to the Gentile mercy – they oppose it and are prepared for mercy themselves. Only by allowing such overt hostility to manifest itself in Israel could God make them fully aware of their need of his mercy. They had opposed that mercy among Gentiles, but in doing so they were actually putting themselves in the place where they must and could be its objects as well.

Moo again sees some formal parallelism here in the text of verses 30 and 31, with a chiasm linking the end of verse 30 with the beginning of verse 31:

¹¹ Robert Jamieson et al., *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co, 1945).

Verse 30

“Just as”
 “you”
 “at one time”
 “disobeyed God”

 “and now”
 “you have received mercy”
 “because of (dative) their disobedience”¹³

Verse 31

“so also”
 “they”
 “now”
 “have disobeyed”
 “for (dative) the sake of mercy for you”
 “in order that [now]”¹²
 “they might also receive mercy”

The parallelism here shows a clear cause-and-effect construction whereby the Gentiles, who were formerly “alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12b), at one time disobeyed God and have now been shown mercy. So also Israel is currently disobeying God, but they will also receive God’s divine mercy in the future. Paul’s particular emphasis to the Gentiles is that the “final destiny of the still disobedient Jews is that they too, like those Gentile Christians who were once disobedient, should receive mercy” (Cranfield, 585).

32 For God was actually rendering all mankind universally dependent upon His mercy. The “all” here refers to both Jews and Gentiles, and all peoples, both Jew and Gentile, are enclosed under the dominion of sin and disobedience. God’s providential ordering has allowed

¹² The presence of the second *vōv* (“now”) of verse 31 has been the source of considerable discussion and is omitted in $\hat{\imath}^{46}$ A D² F G Ψ 1739 1881 $\tilde{\imath}$ latt. Important Alexandrian and Western witness that retain *vōv* include A B D*.^c 1506 pc bo. A few of manuscripts (33 365 pc sa) substitute $\upsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\upsilon\nu$ (“finally”) for *vōv*. This substitution seems to solve an exegetical problem with this verse, since it would appear that the Jews are not now receiving God’s mercy but they will receive it in the future. But the fact that this substitution removes this exegetical problem makes its presence suspect (Schreiner, 630). External evidence slightly favors the omission of *vōv* with good representatives from the major Alexandrian and Byzantine texttypes. Internally, scribes could have added *vōv* here to give balance to the preceding clause (“they have now been disobedient...they may now receive mercy”; see also exegeses of verses 30-31, particularly the parallelism). However, it seems much more likely that they would have deleted it because of its seeming inappropriateness in this context. A decision is difficult, but the inclusion of *vōv* is slightly preferred (hence the brackets in NA²⁷), since it is the more difficult reading and is adequately represented in the manuscripts (Michael H. Burer et al., *New Testament: New English Translation, Novum Testamentum Graece*, [Diglot ed. (Stuttgart Dallas, [Tex.]: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; NET Bible Press, 2004), 430).

¹³ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 733.

men to exercise their freedom and, in conjunction with his judicial hardening, has brought it about that men are imprisoned in their disobedience so that they have no possibility of escape unless God's mercy releases them (Cranfield, 587). The reduction of the Jews to the Gentiles' level of guilt was for the purpose that they might receive the same mercy as Gentiles. Paul's point then is that *all people* have sinned and *all people* must come to God through His mercy.¹⁴

Conclusion and Application

We must be conscious of the great truth revealed by Paul that God chose the Jews so the Gentiles might be saved. God's promise to Abraham was, "In you will all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3). The great tragedy from history is that Israel became exclusive and failed to share the truth with the Gentiles. They thought the Gentiles had to become Jews (proselytes) in order to be saved. But God in his divine plan of salvation history declared both Jews and Gentiles to be lost and condemned. This meant that he could have mercy on all because of Christ's sacrificial work on the cross.

So then, how should we view our position in Christ? To be sure, we must be continually grateful for God's mercy on us – a mercy bestowed upon us on account of the disobedience of Israel. However, we must always remember our place as the "wild branches" that have been grafted into the "olive tree." It is Israel's disobedience that is the source of God's mercy, making available salvation to the Gentiles. Lest we become a type of Israel and regard ourselves as exclusive as the body of Christ (the Church), let us never forget that God will fulfill his covenant with Israel and that at Christ's second coming all Israel will be saved. Let us praise

¹⁴ There exist two secondary textual variants of τοὺς πάντας ("all people") in verse 32. Most manuscripts read τοὺς πάντας (so NA²⁷), while others read τὰ πάντα (P^{46vid} D* latt.) or merely πάντα (F G). The variants from NA²⁷ appear to be a secondary assimilation to Gal 3:22 (συνέκλεισεν ἡ γραφή τὰ πάντα ὑπὸ ἁμαρτίαν; "the scripture imprisoned everyone under sin") and do not affect the meaning in either case (so Schreiner, 630).

God for his compassion and the knowledge that he will accomplish all things in accordance with his will. Let us also continue to bear witness of the Gospel to all people in order that the Jews might become jealous of the blessings that God is bestowing upon Gentile Christians with the result that the Jews themselves might come to a saving knowledge of God's grace and salvation.

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