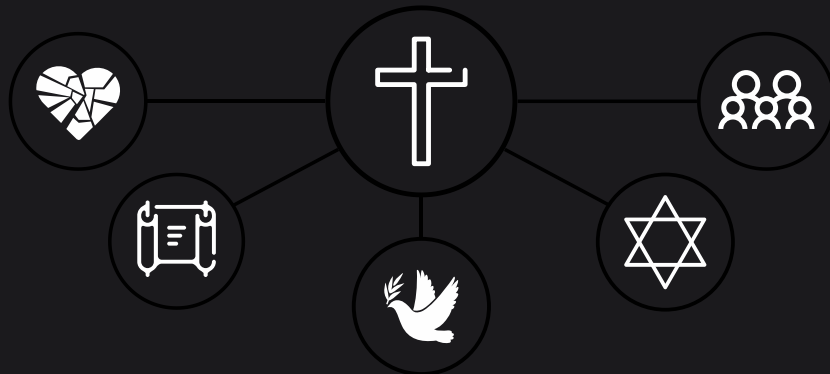




# ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



**Title: Without Excuse**

**Text: Romans 11:16-36**

**Date: May 28, 2023**

**Main Idea:** God's plans and purposes in salvation for both Jews and Gentiles are greater than we can imagine or understand, leading us to worship and glorify Him.

## Personal Study Guide

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**READ ROMANS 11:17-36**

**Review:** Romans 9-11: As this section draws to a close, it is worth looking back to the previous several lessons to recall the series of arguments Paul has advanced in these chapters. Take a few moments to review those passages and recall the highlights.

- Beginning in Romans 9, Paul sets the stage both for his love and concern for the Jews but at the same time makes clear their status under the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants does not ensure their salvation. In fact, their rejection of Christ opened the door for the salvation of believing Gentiles. Ultimately, the Jews chose an adherence to law/rules over obedience.
- In Romans 10, Paul made clear that salvation is available to all, including both Jews and Greeks, if one will simply believe and confess.
- In Romans 11, Paul starts the chapter by making clear there historically has been disobedience by Israelites, but that God has preserved for Himself a remnant of faithful believers.

## **Highlight – What stands out?**

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1. What words, phrases, or themes stand out to you in these verses? Do you see any that are repeated, and if so, why do you think Paul focused on them? Does anything surprise you or seem difficult to understand?
2. Recall what you have learned in previous chapters about Paul's heart for Israel. How does this continue the themes Paul has been discussing? How does this fit within his larger argument?
3. Who is Paul's audience in this section? Is it the same throughout or does it change?

4. Considering this in context of preceding chapters, what strikes you about the conclusion of the chapter? Where does he ultimately want his audience to focus?

## Explain – What does this mean?

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This passage can be broken into two sections. The first half (v. 17-24) deals with the extended metaphor of the Olive Tree. The second half (v. 25-36) draws on and concludes Paul’s prior argument to draw this section on Israel to a conclusion. The questions below will take each half in turn. For your class, you may want to focus on one or the other.

### The Olive Tree

1. Paul draws on the imagery of an olive tree and the practice of grafting in new branches to present insights about salvation for Jews and Gentiles. Use the table below to identify the aspects of this image and how details correspond with aspects of his argument:

Image	Represents	Action

NOTE: Commentators including both John Stott and Collin Kruse remarked on the frequent discussion in academic literature that Paul’s metaphor is in reverse of actual agriculture practice at the time in that the new branches incorporated into the cultivated olive tree came from a wild olive shoot. Per the commentators, a wild shoot grafted into a cultivated plant would likely yield inferior fruit. This passage presents what would be the opposite of standard practice. Stott and Kruse point out that Paul’s point is more spiritual in meaning, not simply a restatement of practical agriculture. However, at least one author has previously posited the incorporation of a wild olive branch into a mature, cultivated plant was actually utilized to

reinvigorate an otherwise declining plant. Although a seeming minority view, it does seem to fit with the narrative Paul is establishing.

2. What behaviors or attitudes from the Gentiles does Paul seem to be addressing in v. 17-24? Why do you think he felt compelled to say this?
  - a. In v. 18, what does he say is the source of support the Gentiles should have appreciation for? How has Paul reflected this in the very substance of his argument?
  - b. In v. 20, what does he specifically warn them against?
3. What does Paul mean in v. 21 when he says that God will not spare the wild branches? Does he mean that these Gentiles may lose their salvation?
4. Consider v. 22 talking about the kindness and severity of God, how does this challenge your understanding of God and his plan for salvation? What does Paul mean about continuing or being cut off?

### The Mystery

1. In v. 25-26, Paul refers to this truth as a “mystery.” What does he mean by calling this a mystery? What are the three elements of this mystery? What does this mean for salvation for Gentiles and for the Israelites?

2. Consider v. 28-29, what does he mean when he describes the Jews as enemies regarding the Gospel? Does this contradict him referring to some Jews being part of the elect in the very next statement? How does Paul reconcile these?
  
3. When Paul says the gifts of the calling of God are irrevocable (v. 29), does he contradict his previous references to branches being cut off (v. 17)?
  
4. Why does he continue to remind the Gentiles they are direct beneficiaries of the hardening of the hearts and disobedience of the Jews (v. 30)? What is the response he wants his Gentile audience to have?
  
5. Paul depicts an interconnected relationship between the Jews and Gentiles. How does this cycle work in v. 25-26 and v. 30-32? What is the ultimate outcome of this cycle? How does Paul respond to this?

## **Apply – How does this change me?**

1. How would you summarize Paul's conclusion to this extended argument in v. 33-36? Why is this an appropriate conclusion for this section? How has this passage challenged your understanding of God's plan in salvation? What has is taught, reminded, or reinforced for you about God?
2. Paul urges humility on behalf of Gentile believers toward the Jews but also toward their heritage dating back to the Old Testament. Why is this a crucial reminder that can apply to believers even today?
3. Paul repeatedly points to the potential for believing Gentiles to push Jews toward saving faith through jealousy that others are partaking of God's grace (v. 11, 14, and 31). What qualities of a changed life make it persuasive to those who may have a hardened heart or may be far from the Lord? Do you find yourself encouraged or inspired when you are around believers who clearly display or share the work God is doing in their lives?

## **Respond – What's my next step?**

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1. Think back through Paul's argument in Romans 9-11. How has his argument and focus on the salvation of Israel changed you and your thinking about salvation? Has it changed your perception of grace?
2. What does this chapter teach you about God? Have you learned anything new or unexpected from Paul's argument?

3. Commentators such as Stott have referred to the final verses as a form of doxology (shifting from theological argument to worship of who God is). What makes this an appropriate conclusion to this section?
  
4. Throughout this section, Paul emphasizes his personal desire and passion to see his Jewish brethren be saved. Although his ministry is primarily to the Gentiles, he recognizes and celebrates its potential to ultimately result in salvation for Jews. What lessons can we draw for how we should relate to people around us who do not know the Lord?

## **Commentary: Romans 11:17-36 by John Stott**

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**Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven't received yours.**

*b. The allegory of the olive tree (17-24)*

The olive, cultivated in groves or orchards throughout Palestine, was an accepted emblem of Israel,<sup>28</sup> as was also the vine.<sup>29</sup> Paul now develops the metaphor in such a way as to accommodate and illustrate his teaching about Jews and Gentiles. The cultivated olive is the people of God, whose root is the patriarchs and whose stem represents the continuity of the centuries. Now *some of the branches have been broken off*, standing for the unbelieving Jews who have been temporarily discarded, *and you* (Gentile believers), *though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others* (the Jewish remnant), so that you now share with them *in the nourishing sap from the olive root* (17).

Some commentators make heavy weather of Paul's allegory. They point out that, according to the normal procedure, 'grafts must necessarily be of branches from a cultivated olive inserted into a wild stock, the reverse process being one which would be valueless and is never performed'.<sup>30</sup> C. H. Dodd goes further and makes merry at Paul's expense. 'Paul had the limitations of the town-bred man ... and he had not the curiosity to inquire what went on in the olive-yards which fringed every road he walked.'<sup>31</sup> Poor ignorant city boy! So some scholars draw attention to Paul's reference in verse 24 to what is 'contrary to nature' and suggest that Paul knew what he was saying and was deliberately wishing to teach theological rather than horticultural lessons.

In 1905, however, Sir William Ramsay wrote an interesting article, which is still quoted, in which he drew on both ancient and modern authorities. The process Paul described, he wrote, was still in use in Palestine 'in exceptional circumstances ...', for 'it is customary to reinvigorate an olive tree which is ceasing to bear fruit by grafting it with a shoot of the wild-olive, so that the sap of the tree ennobles this wild shoot and the tree now again begins to bear fruit'.<sup>32</sup> Paul's reference, therefore, is not to 'the ordinary process of grafting the young olive-tree' but to 'the method of invigorating a decadent olive-tree'.<sup>33</sup> In this case what is 'contrary to nature' is not the 'grafting' but the 'belonging', namely that the shoot has been cut from the wild olive to which it naturally belonged and has been grafted into the cultivated olive to which it does not naturally belong.<sup>34</sup>

Paul develops his allegory in such a way as to play on the themes of 'broken off' and 'grafted in', and to teach two complementary lessons. The first is a warning to the Gentile believers not to presume (17–22), and the second a promise to the Israelite unbelievers that they could be restored (23–24).

The warning to the believing Gentiles is clear. The olive has experienced both a pruning and a grafting. Some branches have been cut out of the cultivated tree. That is, some Jews have been rejected. And in their place a wild shoot has been grafted in.

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<sup>28</sup> Je. 11:16; Ho. 14:6.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Ps. 80:8ff.

<sup>30</sup> Sanday and Headlam, p. 328.

<sup>31</sup> Dodd, p. 180.

<sup>32</sup> Page 19. The article appeared in W. Robertson Nicoll (ed.), *The Expositor*, 6th series, vol. XI (Hodder and Stoughton, 1905), pp. 16ff. and 152ff., and was later included in Ramsay's *Pauline and Other Studies* (1906), pp. 217ff.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ziesler (1989), p. 281.



That is, some Gentiles have believed and been welcomed into God's covenant people. *Do not boast over those branches.* This is the warning, which Paul corroborates with a number of arguments. First, he says, you must remember your dependence on the root, for branches have no life in themselves. *Consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you* (18). Secondly, you must reflect that your stability is due to your faith alone. You may protest that '*Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in*' (19). This is formally true. *Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith* (20). So your position is decidedly vulnerable.

Thirdly, *do not be arrogant, but be afraid* (20). For you must not forget what happened to unbelieving Israel, which belonged naturally to the olive tree. *For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either* (21), for you do not naturally belong. Fourthly, you must constantly meditate on the character of God. *Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God, sternness in judgment upon those who fell, the apostate Jews, but kindness to you, believing Gentiles, who have been incorporated by his sheer grace alone, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you will be cut off* (22). Not that those who truly belong to him will ever be rejected, but that continuance or perseverance is the hallmark of God's authentic children.<sup>35</sup>

This exhortation to Gentile believers not to boast, together with the arguments with which it was buttressed, was undoubtedly much needed in Rome. For, although the Jews were tolerated and protected by law from Gentile molestation, they suffered a great deal of popular Gentile ill will and sometimes from outbreaks of violence. Resisting assimilation to Gentile culture, and refusing to abandon or modify their own practices, 'their exclusiveness bred the unpopularity out of which anti-Semitism was born. The Jew was a figure of amusement, contempt or hatred to the Gentiles among whom he lived.'<sup>36</sup> Paul was determined that Gentile believers in Rome would have no share in such anti-Semitic prejudice.

After this warning to Gentile believers against pride and presumption, Paul is ready with his promise to Jewish unbelievers. His argument is that if those grafted in could be cut off, then those cut off could be grafted in again. The key word is *persist* (*epimenō*), the same verb as is rendered 'continue' in the previous verse: *And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again* (23). Moreover, the assurance of this is drawn from the contrast between the natural and the unnatural branches: *After all, if you (sc. Gentile believers) were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these (sc. Jewish believers), the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!* (24). In other words, 'the restoration of Israel is an easier process than the call of the Gentiles'.<sup>37</sup>

Much of the 'chain of blessing', then, is included in the allegory of the olive tree, especially the rejection of the Jews (cultivated branches broken off), the incorporation

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<sup>35</sup> E.g. Heb. 3:14; 1 Jn. 2:19.

<sup>36</sup> E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden, 1976), pp. 123f.

sc Seneca

sc Seneca

<sup>37</sup> Sanday and Headlam, p. 330.

of the Gentiles (the wild shoot grafted in) and the expected restoration of the Jews (natural branches grafted back in again). What the allegory does not permit is the further truth that through Israel's restoration the Gentiles will be yet more richly blessed. The warning and the promise are paramount, however. First the warning: since the natural branches were broken off, the wild ones could be too (21). The Gentiles could be rejected like the Jews. There is no room for complacency. Secondly the promise: since the wild branches were grafted in, the natural ones could be too (24). The Jews could be accepted like the Gentiles. There is no room for despair.

c. *The divine mystery (25–32)*

Having completed his allegory of the olive tree, Paul again addresses his readers directly, his 'brothers', probably including both Gentile and Jewish church members, since he is now going to refer to the future of both. *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited* (25a). He has already warned them against boasting (18) and arrogance (20), and now against conceit. 'Not ignorant so that not conceited' is the essence of what he writes, for he knows that ignorance is the cause of conceit. It is when we have false or fantasy images of ourselves that we grow proud. Conversely, knowledge is conducive to humility, for humility is honesty, not hypocrisy. The complete antidote to pride is truth. If only the Jewish and Gentile members of the church in Rome can grasp their position *vis-à-vis* one another in the purpose of God, they will have nothing to boast about.

What Paul specially wants them to know is *this mystery*. By a 'mystery' he means not a secret which is known only by the initiated, but a secret which has now been openly revealed and has therefore become public truth. Essentially this is Christ himself, 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'.<sup>38</sup> But in particular it is the good news that in Christ Gentiles are now equal beneficiaries with the Jews of the promises of God and equal members of his family (16:25f.).<sup>39</sup> In this passage in Romans, however, the mystery seems to be what he is about to tell them. It consists of three consecutive truths. The first is that *Israel has experienced a hardening in part* (25b). This fact is not new, since Paul has already stated it in verse 7. As we have already seen, it is God who 'hardens' (9:18), although this is a judicial process by which he hands people over to their own stubbornness. The 'hardening' takes the form of spiritual insensitivity. In the case of Israel it is the same as the 'veil' which Paul elsewhere says lies over their hearts and minds.<sup>40</sup>

But now the apostle stresses that it is only partial (*in part*), since not all Israelites have experienced it (*i.e.* not the believing remnant), and only temporary (*until ...*), since it will last only until the second stage of God's unfolding plan. This Paul now states: *until the full number of the Gentiles has come in* (25c). While Israel remains hardened, and continues to reject Christ, the gospel will be preached throughout the world,<sup>41</sup> and more and more Gentiles will hear and respond to it. And this process will continue

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<sup>38</sup> Col. 2:2f.; 4:3.

<sup>39</sup> Eph. 1:9; 3:3ff.; Col. 1:26f.; 3:11.

<sup>40</sup> 2 Cor. 3:14ff.; 4:3f.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Mk. 13:10; cf. Rev. 7:9ff.

until *the full number* or full complement (*plērōma*, the same word having been used of Israel in verse 12) of *the Gentiles* has been made up.

This will bring about the third stage: *And so all Israel will be saved* (26a). The three main words in this statement, namely 'all', 'Israel' and 'saved', need some investigation.

First, what is the identity of *Israel* which is to be saved? Calvin believed it was a reference to the church. 'I extend the word *Israel*', he wrote, 'to include all the people of God', so that, when the Gentiles have come in and the Jews have returned, 'the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be drawn from both, will thus be completed...'<sup>42</sup> It is of course true that Paul referred to the church as 'the Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16, but throughout Romans 'Israel' means ethnic or national Israel, in contrast to the Gentile nations. This is plainly so in verse 25 of this context; so the word could hardly take on a different meaning in the very next verse (26). The natural interpretation of the 'mystery' is that Israel as a people is hardened until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in, and then at that point (it is implied) Israel's hardening will be over and 'all Israel will be saved'. I do not think John Murray was putting it too strongly when he wrote: 'It is exegetically impossible to give to "Israel" in this verse any other denotation than that which belongs to the term throughout this chapter.'<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, there is the word *all*. Whom does Paul intend to include in 'all Israel'? At present Israel is hardened except for a believing remnant, and will remain so until the Gentiles have come in. Then 'all Israel' must mean the great mass of the Jewish people, comprising both the previously hardened majority and the believing minority. It need not mean literally every single Israelite. This is in keeping with contemporary usage. ' "All Israel" is a recurring expression in Jewish literature,' writes F. F. Bruce, 'where it need not mean "every Jew without a single exception", but "Israel as a whole".'<sup>44</sup>

The third word is *saved*. What kind of salvation is in view? The scriptural foundation, which Paul now supplies, will help us to answer this question. It is a potpourri of three texts about the salvation of God's people.

<sup>26b</sup>*The deliverer will come from Zion;  
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.*

<sup>27</sup>*And this is my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins'.*

These verses together make three affirmations. First, *the deliverer will come from Zion*.<sup>45</sup> This was, in Isaiah's original, a reference to Christ's first coming. Secondly, what he would do when he came was described in moral terms: he would '*turn godlessness away from Jacob*'. This seems to be an allusion to Isaiah 27:9, where Jacob's guilt would be atoned for and removed. Thirdly, the deliverer would establish God's covenant, which promised the forgiveness of sins.<sup>46</sup> Putting these truths together, the deliverer would come to bring his people to repentance and so to forgiveness, according to God's covenant promise. It is clear from this that the 'salvation' of Israel for which Paul has prayed (10:1), to which he will lead his own people by arousing their

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<sup>42</sup> Calvin, p. 255.

<sup>43</sup> Murray, vol. II, p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce, p. 209.

<sup>45</sup> Is. 59:20.

<sup>46</sup> Je. 31:33f.

envy (11:14), which has also come to the Gentiles (11:11; cf. 1:16), and which one day 'all Israel' will experience (11:26), is salvation from sin through faith in Christ. It is not a national salvation, for nothing is said about either a political entity or a return to the land. Nor is there any hint of a special way of salvation for the Jews which dispenses with faith in Christ.

It is understandable that since the holocaust Jews have demanded an end to Christian missionary activity among them, and that many Christians have felt embarrassed about continuing it. It is even mooted that Jewish evangelism is an unacceptable form of anti-Semitism. So some Christians have attempted to develop a theological basis for leaving Jews alone in their Judaism. Reminding us that God's covenant with Abraham was an 'everlasting covenant', they maintain that it is still in force, and that therefore God saves Jewish people through their own covenant, without any necessity for them to believe in Jesus. This proposal is usually called a 'two-covenant theology'. Bishop Krister Stendahl was one of the first scholars to argue for it,<sup>47</sup> namely that there are two different salvation 'tracks'—the Christian track for the believing remnant and believing Gentiles, and the track for historical Israel which relies on God's covenant with them. Professor Dunn is surely right to reject this as 'a false and quite unnecessary antithesis'.<sup>48</sup>

Romans 11 stands in clear opposition to this trend because of its insistence on the fact that there is only one olive tree, to which Jewish and Gentile believers both belong. Jewish people 'will be grafted in' again 'if they do not persist in unbelief' (23). So faith in Jesus is essential for them. Whether or not Dr Tom Wright is correct in rejecting the notion of 'a large-scale, last-minute salvation of ethnic Jews',<sup>49</sup> his emphasis on present evangelism ('now', three times in verses 30 and 31) is healthy: 'Paul is envisaging a steady flow of Jews into the church, by grace through faith.'<sup>50</sup> The two-covenant theology also has the disastrous effect of perpetuating the distinction between Jews and Gentiles which Jesus Christ has abolished. 'The irony of this', writes Tom Wright, 'is that the late twentieth century, in order to avoid anti-Semitism, has advocated a position (the non-evangelization of the Jews) which Paul regards precisely as anti-Semitic.'<sup>51</sup> 'It would be quite intolerable to imagine a church at any period which was simply a Gentile phenomenon' or 'consisted only of Jews'.<sup>52</sup>

Looking back over verses 11–27, we note that Paul rehearses four times, with modifications, the same Jews-Gentiles-Jews-Gentiles sequence. First, in his 'chain of blessing' (11–12) he moves from Israel's transgression to salvation for the Gentiles, to Israel's envy and fulness, to 'much greater riches'. Secondly, in reference to his own ministry (13–16) he writes of Israel's rejection, the reconciliation of the world, Israel's acceptance and 'life from the dead'. Thirdly, in the allegory of the olive tree (17–24), the

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<sup>47</sup> Stendahl, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Dunn, vol. 38B, p. 683. Cf. Sanders (1983), pp. 194ff. and p. 205, n. 88, and Ziesler (1989), p. 285. For a comprehensive and sensitive statement on the propriety of Jewish evangelism, see *The Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People* (World Evangelical Fellowship, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> Wright, p. 233.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

breaking off of the natural branches is followed by the grafting in of the wild shoot, with the prospect that the natural branches will be grafted back in again and that the wild branches must continue in God's kindness. Fourthly, in Paul's statement of the divine mystery (25–26), he moves from Israel's partial, temporary hardening to the fulness of the Gentiles to the salvation of all Israel, though the grand finale of blessing to the world is not mentioned.

The conclusion to Romans 11 (28–32), apart from the doxology (33–36), contains two distinct statements. Both are very finely chiselled and sculptured. Both focus on still unbelieving Israel ('they'), although in relation to believing Gentiles ('you'). Both not only describe present reality (which includes continuing Jewish unbelief), but also indicate the grounds for confidence that God has neither rejected his people (1–2) nor allowed them to fall beyond recovery (11). What are these grounds? They are God's election (28–29) and God's mercy (30–32).

First, God's election is irrevocable. *As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs (28), for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (29).*

Here are two contrasting ways of evaluating the Jewish people. The essence of the antithesis is in the words 'they are enemies' and 'they are loved'. Because 'loved' is passive, 'enemies' must be passive too. That is, it denotes God's hostility to them, in the sense that they are under his judgment. Indeed, verse 28 insists that they are objects of God's love and wrath simultaneously. The same verse includes two further explanatory contrasts, which develop the antithesis between 'they' (unbelieving Jews) and 'you' (believing Gentiles). In relation to the gospel they are enemies because of you; in relation to election they are loved because of the patriarchs. This needs elaboration. On the one hand, the Jews are not only rejecting the gospel but actively opposing it and doing their best to prevent you Gentiles from hearing it. So then, in relation to the gospel, and for your sake (because God wants you to hear and believe), he is hostile to them. On the other hand, the Jews are the chosen, special people of God, the descendants of the noble patriarchs with whom the covenant was made, and to whom the promises were given. So then, in relation to election, and for the sake of the patriarchs (because God is faithful to his covenant and promises), he loves them and is determined to bring them to salvation. For the fact is that God never goes back on his gifts or call (29). Both are *irrevocable*. His gifts are the privileges he bestowed on Israel, which are listed in 9:4–5. As for his call, 'God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?'<sup>53</sup> It is because of God's steadfast faithfulness that we can have confidence in Israel's restoration.

The second ground for confidence that God has a future for his people is his mercy. For God's mercy is shown to the disobedient. *Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience (30), so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you (31).*

These carefully constructed verses contain a parallel rather than a contrast. Human disobedience and divine mercy are depicted in the experience of both Gentiles and Jews; the obvious difference is that, whereas God has already been merciful to disobedient but repentant Gentiles, his mercy to disobedient Israel belongs largely to

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<sup>53</sup> Nu. 23:19.

the future. But there is another difference, namely in the reasons given for God's mercy, which are expressed in the Greek sentence by simple datives. Thus, you received mercy 'by their disobedience' (30), whereas they will receive mercy 'by your mercy' (31). More fully, it is because of disobedient Israel that disobedient Gentiles have received mercy, and it is because of this mercy to disobedient Gentiles that disobedient Jews will receive mercy too. We detect yet again the 'chain of blessing', as Israel's disobedience has led to mercy for the Gentiles, which in turn will lead to mercy for Israel.

Verse 32 sums up the argument in such a way as to disclose God's overruling purpose and plan. *For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.* Disobedience is likened to a dungeon in which God has incarcerated all human beings, so that 'they have no possibility of escape except as God's mercy releases them'.<sup>54</sup> This has been the argument of this letter, as in its first three chapters Paul demonstrated that all human beings are sinful, guilty and without excuse, and then from 3:21 onwards unfolded the way of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. He writes something similar in Galatians. 'The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin ... We were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge (RSV, 'was our custodian') to lead us to Christ....'<sup>55</sup> Thus human disobedience is the prison from which divine mercy liberates us.

But who are the 'all men' who are bound over to disobedience, and the 'all' on whom God will have mercy (32)? On this verse some have built their universalistic dreams. And, isolated from its context in Romans, it could be understood to promise universal salvation in the end. But Romans will not allow this interpretation, since in it Paul declares that there is to be a 'day of God's wrath' (2:5), on which some will receive 'wrath and anger', 'trouble and distress' (2:8f.). What, then, is the alternative? It is to note that in both halves of verse 32, regarding those whom God has imprisoned in disobedience and those on whom he will have mercy, Paul does not actually write of 'all men' or of 'all', but of 'the all' (*tous pantas*). And this expression in its context refers to the two groups who are contrasted throughout the chapter, and especially in verses 28 and 31, namely the 'they' and the 'you', the Jews and the Gentiles.

Paul has been at pains to argue that there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles either in sin (3:9, 22) or in salvation (10:12). Now he writes that, as they have been together in the prison of their disobedience, so they will be together in the freedom of God's mercy. Moreover, he has predicted the future 'fulness' both of Israel (12) and of the Gentiles (25). It is when these two 'fulnesses' have been fused that the new humanity will have been realized, consisting of huge numbers of the redeemed, the great multinational multitude which no-one can count,<sup>56</sup> 'the many' who were formerly in Adam but are now in Christ, experiencing his overflowing grace and reigning with him in life (5:12ff.). The end of God's ways will be 'mercy, mercy

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<sup>54</sup> Cranfield, vol. II, p. 587.

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

<sup>55</sup> Gal. 3:22ff.

<sup>56</sup> Rev. 7:9.

uncompromised',<sup>57</sup> mercy on the fulness of both Jews and Gentiles, mercy on 'them all', that is, 'on all without distinction, rather than on all without exception'.<sup>58</sup>

## 15. Doxology

### 11:33–36

For eleven chapters Paul has been giving his comprehensive account of the gospel. Step by step he has shown how God has revealed his way of putting sinners right with himself, how Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification, how we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, how the Christian life is lived not under the law but in the Spirit, and how God plans to incorporate the fulness of Israel and of the Gentiles into his new community. Paul's horizons are vast. He takes in time and eternity, history and eschatology, justification, sanctification and glorification. Now he stops, out of breath. Analysis and argument must give way to adoration. 'Like a traveller who has reached the summit of an Alpine ascent,' wrote F. L. Godet of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 'the apostle turns and contemplates. Depths are at his feet; but waves of light illumine them, and there spreads all around an immense horizon which his eye commands.'<sup>1</sup> Before Paul goes on to outline the practical implications of the gospel, he falls down before God and worships (33–36).

Paul's praise is informed by Scripture, and is full of Old Testament phraseology. Yet it is his own expression of humble wonder and dependence.

He begins with *an astonished exclamation: Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!* (33). There are two possible ways of interpreting the opening sentence. The first is to understand Paul to be referring to one truth, namely God's wisdom and knowledge, whose profound riches he celebrates (NIV, 'the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God'). The second is to understand him to be referring to two truths, namely God's riches on the one hand and God's wisdom and knowledge on the other, and to be celebrating the depth of both (RSV, 'the depth of the riches *and* wisdom and knowledge of God'). That this second interpretation is correct (namely that God's wealth and wisdom are both being magnified) is suggested by the parallel in the next exclamation, in which Paul alludes both to God's unsearchable *judgments* (what he thinks and decides) and to his untraceable *paths* (what he does and where he goes). In fact, this distinction continues throughout the doxology—his wealth and his wisdom (33a), his judgments and his paths (33b), his revelation (34) and his gifts (35).

Paul has already written of God's wealth: 'the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience' (2:4), 'the riches of his glory' (9:23) and the riches which the Lord Jesus bestows indiscriminately on all who call on him (10:12). Elsewhere he describes God as

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<sup>57</sup> Cranfield, vol. II, p. 587.

<sup>58</sup> Bruce, p. 211.

<sup>1</sup> Godet, p. 416.

NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

'rich in mercy'<sup>2</sup> and refers to Christ's inexhaustible riches.<sup>3</sup> The dominant thought is that salvation is a gift from God's riches and that it immensely enriches those to whom it is given.

Then there is God's wisdom, which is hidden in Christ,<sup>4</sup> was displayed on the cross (though it appears to human beings to be folly),<sup>5</sup> and is unfolded in his saving purpose.<sup>6</sup> Thus if the wisdom of God planned salvation, the wealth of God bestows it. Moreover, God's wealth and wisdom are not only deep; they are actually unfathomable (33b). His decisions are unsearchable, and his ways inscrutable. This is the New Testament equivalent of Isaiah 55:8f. where God declares his thoughts to be higher than our thoughts, and his ways than our ways. But of course! How could finite and fallen creatures like us ever imagine that we could penetrate into the infinite mind of God? His mind (what he thinks) and his activity (what he does) are altogether beyond us.<sup>7</sup>

Paul continues, secondly, with a *rhetorical question*, in fact with two. The two exclamation marks of verse 33 ('Oh the depths ...!' 'How unsearchable ...!') are followed by the two question marks of verses 34 and 35 ('Who has known ...?' 'Who has ever given ...?')

<sup>34</sup>*'Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counsellor?'*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>35</sup>*'Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay him?'*<sup>9</sup>

It is frankly ludicrous, as Paul's two Old Testament quotations make clear, to imagine that we could ever teach or give God anything. It would be absurd to claim (since his thoughts are unsearchable) that we know his mind and have offered him our advice. It would be equally absurd to claim (since his ways are inscrutable) that we have given him a gift or two and so put him in our debt. No, no. We are not God's counsellor; he is ours. We are not God's creditor; he is ours. We depend entirely on him to teach and to save us. The initiative in both revelation and redemption lies in his grace. The attempt to reverse roles would be to dethrone God and to deify ourselves. So the answer to both questions in verses 34–35 is, 'Nobody!'

Thirdly, Paul makes a *theological affirmation*: *For from him and through him and to him are all things* (36a). This is the reason for our human dependence on God. *All things* often refers to the material creation. Perhaps here, however, Paul is referring to the new creation as well, the coming into being of the new multiracial people of God. If we ask *where* all things came from in the beginning, and still come from today, the

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<sup>2</sup> Eph. 2:4; cf. 1:7.

<sup>3</sup> Eph. 3:8; 3:16. Cf. also 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 4:19.

<sup>4</sup> Col. 2:2f.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 1:18ff.

<sup>6</sup> Eph. 1:8; 3:10.

<sup>7</sup> For the unfathomable nature of God's mind and mysteries see e.g. Jb. 5:9; 11:7; Ps. 139:6; Is. 40:28.

<sup>8</sup> Is. 40:13.

<sup>9</sup> Jb. 35:7–41:11.



answer must be, 'From God.' If we ask *how* all things came into being and remain in being, our answer is, 'Through God.' If we ask *why* everything came into being, and where everything is going, our answer must be, 'For and to God.' These three prepositions (*ek*, 'out of' or 'from'; *dia*, 'through'; and *eis*, 'for' or 'unto') indicate that God is the creator, sustainer and heir of everything, its source, means and goal. He is the Alpha and the Omega,<sup>10</sup> and every letter of the alphabet in between.

Fourthly, Paul concludes with *a final ascription: To him be the glory for ever! Amen* (36b). It is because all things are from, through and to God that the glory must be his alone. This is why human pride is so offensive. Pride is behaving as if we were God Almighty, strutting round the earth as if we owned the place, repudiating our due dependence on God, pretending instead that all things depend on us, and thus arrogating to ourselves the glory which belongs to God alone.

It is of great importance to note from Romans 1–11 that theology (our belief about God) and doxology (our worship of God) should never be separated. On the one hand, there can be no doxology without theology. It is not possible to worship an unknown god. All true worship is a response to the self-revelation of God in Christ and Scripture, and arises from our reflection on who he is and what he has done. It was the tremendous truths of Romans 1–11 which provoked Paul's outburst of praise. The worship of God is evoked, informed and inspired by the vision of God. Worship without theology is bound to degenerate into idolatry. Hence the indispensable place of Scripture in both public worship and private devotion. It is the Word of God which calls forth the worship of God.

On the other hand, there should be no theology without doxology. There is something fundamentally flawed about a purely academic interest in God. God is not an appropriate object for cool, critical, detached, scientific observation and evaluation. No, the true knowledge of God will always lead us to worship, as it did Paul. Our place is on our faces before him in adoration.

As I believe Bishop Handley Moule said at the end of the last century, we must 'beware equally of an undevotional theology and of an untheological devotion'.

## 16. A manifesto of evangelism

'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' (10:15).<sup>1</sup>

Convinced that God has a future for both Jews and Gentiles, and that their growth into 'fulness' will be brought about by evangelism, Paul makes a forceful statement of its logic (10:14f.) and alludes in other ways to the spread of the gospel. From these chapters, therefore, it is possible to summarize Paul's teaching on evangelism to form an eight-point manifesto.

*1. The need for evangelism: evangelism is necessary because until people hear and receive the gospel they are lost.*

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<sup>10</sup> Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13.

<sup>1</sup> Is. 52:7.

This recognition of the gravity of the human situation, which Paul argued in Romans 1–3, is indispensable to evangelism. All human beings in God’s sight are sinful, guilty and without excuse. If they are to be saved, they must call on the name of the Lord (10:13), but in order to do this, they must be given an opportunity to hear the good news (10:14f.).

*2. The scope of evangelism: the whole human race must be given the chance to hear the gospel.*

Just as the heavens proclaim God’s glory throughout the earth (10:18), so Christian witnesses must proclaim his grace worldwide. All nations must hear the gospel (1:5; 16:26). But so must Israel, for neither her unique privileges (9:4f.) nor her religious zeal (10:2) can be a substitute for faith in Jesus (11:23). So there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in respect either of their sin (3:22f.) or of the means of their salvation, for the same Lord Jesus ‘richly blesses all who call on him’ (10:12). There can be no question of two ways of salvation, one for Gentiles and another for Jews.

*3. The incentive to evangelism: evangelism arises from the love and the longing of the heart.*

Paul the patriotic Jew showed no sign of impatience, bitterness or scorn that his compatriots had rejected their Messiah. As Dr Lloyd-Jones has put it, Paul ‘displays no trace of annoyance with them. There is not a suspicion of any contemptuous attitude towards them. He does not dismiss them, denounce them, attack them; he is not even irritated by them.’<sup>2</sup> Instead, he wrote both of his heart’s anguish that they were lost (9:1f.) and of his heart’s longing that they might be saved (10:1). He would be willing even to perish if thereby they might be saved. Evangelism lacks authenticity if it is not inspired by the same love.

*4. The nature of evangelism: evangelism is sharing with others the good news of Christ crucified and risen.*

Evangelism means spreading the evangel. Consequently, we cannot define the former without defining the latter. In 9:30–10:13 Paul sets over against each other the false and the true ways of salvation, and we must do the same. In particular, we need to focus on Christ and his accessibility, for he has already come, died and risen, and is readily available to simple faith (10:6ff.).

*5. The logic of evangelism: evangelism demands the sending out of evangelists, so that people may call on Christ for salvation.*

There can be no salvation without calling on Christ’s name, no calling on his name without believing what it implies, no believing in Christ without hearing him, no hearing without the preaching of the gospel, and no preaching without preachers being sent (10:13ff.). Although all Jesus’ disciples are expected to share in evangelistic outreach, he gives to some the gift and calling of an evangelist, and these the church must solemnly commission and authorize to preach.

*6. The result of evangelism: evangelism brings such blessings to those who believe, that it arouses the envy of others.*

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd-Jones, vol. 9, p. 33.

Three times in these chapters Paul employs the same Greek verb *parazēloō*, to 'make envious' (10:19; 11:11, 14). Envy is the desire to have for oneself something possessed by somebody else. If that 'something' is salvation, it is understandable that people 'envy' those who have received it, that is, desire it for themselves. Many have been converted through 'envy'. One such was Robert Robinson, who later became a Baptist minister, author and hymn-writer. In 1752, at the age of seventeen, he went to hear George Whitefield preach in London, and was converted. He wrote to Whitefield: 'I went pitying the poor deluded Methodists; but came away envying their happiness'.<sup>3</sup>

*7. The hope for evangelism: evangelism has hope of success only if it rests on the election of God.*

Election and evangelism are not incompatible. These very chapters which contain strong teaching on election also contain clear references to the necessity both of prayer-evangelism (interceding for people to be saved, 10:1) and of preaching-evangelism (sharing the good news with others, 10:14f.). Our responsibility is to see that the gospel is preached throughout the world, so that everybody is given the opportunity to hear and to respond. For the Word of God is his appointed way of awakening faith (10:17, NEB) and so of saving those who believe.<sup>4</sup> Not that everybody will respond. God himself knows the painful and even humiliating trauma of patiently holding out his hands to a disobedient and obstinate people (10:21). In sum, 'so far from making evangelism pointless, the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless'.<sup>5</sup>

*8. The goal of evangelism: evangelism introduces converts into the people of God, and so brings glory to God.*

Evangelism is not an end in itself. It also unites us with the people of God. Into God's one olive tree believing Gentiles are grafted and believing Jews are grafted back, so that we all share in the same history (going back to Abraham) and the same geography (extending throughout the world). We thus rejoice in both the continuity and the solidarity of the people of God.

But the ultimate goal of evangelism is the glory of God. The gospel displays his power, proclaims his name, makes known the riches of his glory, and reveals his mercy (9:17, 22f.; 11:30ff.). There is no room for boasting; only for humble, grateful, wondering adoration. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Graham W. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired* (Carey Kingsgate Press, 1955), pp. 10–12. NEB The New English Bible (NT, 1961, second edition 1970; OT, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. 1 Cor. 1:21.

<sup>5</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1961), p. 106. See also R. B. Kuiper, *God-Centred Evangelism* (Banner of Truth, 1961).

<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, [\*The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World\*](#), *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 299–315.

## Additional Resources:

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**Podcast:** [Knowing Faith Podcast: Episode 140 \(Romans 11:25-36\)](#)

**Course:** [Michael Kruger on Romans 11 \(class outline and lecture\)](#)