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All Israel will be Saved

Romans 11:25-36

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I've said before that Romans, along with John's Gospel and Revelation, is one of the high points, the great peaks of the New Testament. Many people see Romans as St. Paul's *magnum opus*, but before we get into Romans this morning, I want to talk about another book. St. Paul's epistle to Philemon is one of the shortest books in the Bible. It's just one chapter long. You can read the whole thing in a minute or two. For years I struggled to understand what it's significance. Where's the theology in this little book, I wondered. But eventually I realised that what Philemon is about—what it illustrates and illustrates dramatically—is the implication and the practical outworking of the theology Paul teaches everywhere else. Philemon *shows* us what the good news about Jesus looks like.

Philemon was a friend of Paul. He was a wealthy Christian man in Colossae, who had opened his home for the meeting of the church there. Philemon had a slave, a young man named Onesimus. We don't know the circumstances behind the event, but Onesimus ran away from Philemon. It sounds like he stole some money as well. And he fled to Rome, where ran into Paul. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon along with the letter, and in the letter Paul does something that is utterly amazing and that illustrates very dramatically the power of the gospel. Paul starts out talking about how Onesimus is like his son and he, Paul, is like Onesimus' father. Paul even offers to cover anything Onesimus might owe to Philemon. That, itself, is pretty remarkable. Someone like Onesimus didn't matter in Roman society, but he mattered to

Paul. But the really profound thing is that Paul urges Philemon to take Onesimus back because of what Jesus has done for both of them and on the basis of love. Paul write about Onesimus, describing him as “no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 16). Again, he urges Philemon—in light of the fact that both he and Onesimus are in Christ—to take Onesimus back, treating him not as a runaway slave who robbed him, but as a brother in the Lord. When you think about that, it's utterly amazing. Jesus brought together a rich man and a slave as brothers. Paul's words elsewhere about neither rich nor poor, young nor old, male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile in Jesus are really driven home by his letter to Philemon. It doesn't mean that Jesus changes who we are in terms of these identities. Some believers are still poor and others rich, some are still Jews and other Gentiles, some are and always will be women and others men, some slave and other free, but Jesus transcends all of that. In him we are united in one covenant family and, in Jesus, we stand before the Father as brothers and sisters—and, Paul reminds us, we need to love each other and related to each other as brothers and sisters no matter our race or background or sex or social class. It's one thing to say it. It's another thing to actually do it. And that's why, I'm convinced, this short little epistle included in the New Testament.

Now, this is just what Paul's been trying to get at in the last three chapters of Romans as he's been writing about God's plan for Jews and Gentiles. This issue was something the early church struggled through. Jews struggled with how to related to Gentiles who were “unclean” and didn't observe their laws on diet, Sabbaths and feasts, or circumcision. But Gentiles struggled, too, with how to relate with Jews. Were Gentiles second-class citizens in God's kingdom? And Gentiles, particularly

after judgement fell on Jerusalem, were tempted to think that there was simply no longer a place for Jews at all in the covenant family. This was the problem in Rome. The Gentiles were tempted to think more highly of themselves and more lowly of the Jews than they should have.

And so Paul now launches into the final part of this long discussion about Jews and Gentiles. Look at Romans 11:25.

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

“Lest you be wise in your own sight.” Lest you think more highly of ourselves than you ought out of ignorance of God's plan. Or, maybe, “Because you've refused to acknowledge the wisdom of God's plan, let me spell out this mystery for you one last time”. Sometimes it's ignorance. Sometimes it's a refusal to accept the wisdom and goodness of God's plan. As I've preached through Romans I've run across more than one objection to what Paul has said here. Some commentators seem to think they're wiser than Paul and, even a couple of people who have listened to me preach on this, have objected to God's plan. They aren't the first and they won't be the last. Whole theological systems have developed from time to time, sometimes to write Paul off as horribly confused and sometimes to explain him away. But Paul writes to people just like this, who can't or won't wrap their heads around what God is doing. And the first thing he does is address them as “brothers”. Paul has written about his fellow Jews as “brothers according to the flesh”, but now he writes to these Gentile believers as his “brothers” too. He does this to stress that Gentile believers are just as much a part of his family as Jewish believers are. The mark of God's covenant family is not whether one is a Jew or a Gentile—or

as in the case of Philemon and Onesimus, slave or free. The mark of membership in God's covenant family is faith in Jesus the Messiah.

Paul goes on. There's a mystery that they've got to understand. If all this seems confusing and hard to understand, you're in good company. It's a mystery and Paul admits it. Now, mystery didn't mean quite the same thing to him as it does to us, but we're not too far off. When he uses the word mystery in this sense, it's his way of referring to the secret counsels of God. God has a plan. As Paul has explained, it's the same plan he's had all along. And that plan has now been revealed in Jesus the Messiah. This is why Paul started out Romans by saying that the good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness—the covenant faithfulness—of God. God had a plan all along. He made promises according to that plan. And while it may at many times have *looked* like God had forgotten either his plan or his promises, it all comes together in Jesus. He fulfils the plan *and* the promises.

The big question that Paul has found many people are struggling with is Israel's unbelief. How can we see God as faithful when most of the Jews rejected Jesus and still reject Jesus. Paul has given us this long answer over the course of Chapters 9-11, but here he sums it up again. Here is the mystery: A partial hardening has come on Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in.

What does that mean? Well, first, "hardening" in the Bible is always tied to a deliberate postponement of God's judgement. When God postpones judgement there are two things that can happen. Either a person or a people can repent and escape God's judgement, or they refuse to repent and harden their hearts against God so that when judgement does come, everyone can see that it is just. In this case, Paul writes that it's a partial

hardening. There is or there will be a remnant. The nation or people as a whole has hardened its heart against God and his Messiah, but there will be a faithful group, a faithful subset nonetheless.

And what's the reason for this delayed judgement on unbelieving Israel? It's to give the Gentile time to give themselves in faithful allegiance to the Lord Jesus—"until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in". Like so many of Paul's phrases here, this is a difficult one. Paul obviously doesn't envisage every last Gentile professing faith in Jesus. The most common take on it is that every nation or people will be represented in the age to come. I think that's fine, I just caution against this leading us into a sort of ethnic or national tokenism, which also seems very common today. I have a friend who works for the world's largest Bible translation ministry and he often talks as if Jesus will return the moment the first person believes in the last people group to hear the good news. Their goal is to hasten Jesus' return by making sure the Bible is translated into every language on earth. And while I applaud their work in getting God's word into the hands of everyone on the planet, I think God has bigger plans than to redeem a token person or two from the last of the nations to be reached. The Church has been called by Jesus and equipped by the Spirit not just to proclaim the good news, but to bring the good news and the life of God's kingdom to bear on the whole earth. We saw a taste of that as the Roman empire eventually submitted to Jesus in the Fourth Century and as the good news not only saved people, but transformed a whole continent in the centuries that followed. Brothers and Sisters, the Church has much work to do—lately it seems that a lot of the work of past generations of Christians has been undone. But Jesus has promised that his Church will prevail and accomplish the task he has given us. It may take another thousand years or

ten thousand years, but the Spirit will do through us the work that Jesus has given him—and us—to do. And, Paul writes, judgement will be held off until that work has been accomplished. And over the course of that time, a remnant of Jews will be saved—not through some extraordinary means or via their own path, but through the same faith as the Gentiles in the same crucified and risen Messiah.

He goes on in verse 26:

And in this way all Israel will be saved...

This is the way, he says, that all Israel will be saved. But that phrase, "all Israel", is yet another passage people have sometimes struggled to understand, but if we let Paul define his own terms it's really not that difficult. Remember, Paul has already made it clear that not all Israel is Israel. There's Israel according to the flesh—the people physically descended from Abraham—and there is true Israel marked out by faith. He wrote in 4:16 that Abraham's true family are "not those of the law only, but all who share Abraham's faith". In 2:29 he wrote that "the Jew is the one in secret". In Galatians 3:28-29 he writes, "you are all one in the Messiah, Jesus, and, if you belong to the Messiah, you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise". Or consider what he writes in Philippians 3:3-4: "It is we who are 'the circumcision,' we who...put no confidence in the flesh". We could go on and on citing Paul on this issue. Bishop Wright puts it this way, "Paul has spent half his writing life telling his reader that Abraham's family, Israel, the Jews, the circumcision, are neither reaffirmed as they stand, nor 'replaced' with someone else...but transformed, through the death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah and the Spirit of Israel's own God, so that Israel is now, as was always promised,

both less and more than the physical family of Abraham.”¹

A partial hardening has come upon Israel, allowing time and space for the Gentiles to come in, and that is how God is saving “all Israel”. “All Israel” was already a common way for Jews to talk about Abraham’s family. What Paul has done over the course of Romans is to redefine that family as it has been reoriented around Jesus. “All Israel” doesn’t refer to all of ethnic Jews, but to the whole family of Abraham defined or marked out by faith in Jesus—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor, male and female.

Paul now follows this up with three quotes from Isaiah 59:20, Jeremiah 31:33-34, and then Isaiah 27:9.

**...as it is written,
“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from
Jacob”;
“and this will be my covenant with
them
when I take away their sins.”**

Paul quotes the prophets to make the point that God does not pour out special privileges on Israel only to leave the Gentiles lost in idolatry and rebellion. All along from Abraham’s time, the plan was to work through Israel to bring redemption to the whole world. Notice, in verse 26, quoting Isaiah, the Deliverer does not come *to* Zion, but will come *from* Zion and go out to the world. This is then God’s means to “banish ungodliness from Jacob” and to renew his covenant. Again, Paul shows us that this has been the plan all along. Why has Israel been cast aside? Because if ethnic Jews had embraced Jesus from the beginning, it would have been too easy for them to see it as an entitlement. Gentiles might have been accepted, but only grudgingly and as second-class members. Paul has

warned that this kind of attitude towards Jesus and towards the gospel undermines the nature of grace. Grace is no longer grace if we’re entitled to it. We know Israel was in danger of doing this because it’s what she had already done with the law and the prophets. Even as things happened, we see this struggle in the Jerusalem church in Acts—a Jewish church struggling with how to relate to Gentile believers. And so it was necessary for the Deliverer to arise from Israel and then to go out to the world from there, to bring the Gentiles into the covenant family, and in the process to show ethnic Jews that by the very same faith—not as an entitlement because of works of the law—they can be grafted back into the family too.

Now, in verses 28-32 Paul sums up the argument he’s been making over these last three chapters:

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

God has allowed the Jews to reject and to become enemies of the gospel for the sake of the Gentiles. Their unbelief, their hardening of heart is tied to God’s delayed judgement and that delay gives time for the Church to carry the good news about Jesus to the whole world. But that doesn’t mean that God doesn’t care for the Jews. A son can reject his father, but he still remains his son and the Lord yearns for these people the way a father yearns for a wayward son. So first the

Gentiles were disobedient. Now the Jews have become disobedient. They’ve been pruned off the tree to make room for the Gentiles to be grafted in. But, Paul writes, they will become jealous as they see the Gentiles taking their place and claiming their inheritance and that will bring many back. In the end, it’s all about mercy. All of us are sinners and so, to know God’s mercy, all of us had to be “consigned to disobedience”. Mercy first for the Gentiles who were disobedient and on the outside and then mercy for the Jews who were cut off, but now have a way back through Jesus. It’s mercy from beginning to end and here Paul sums up the whole letter so far. God’s word has not failed. God has been true to his promises. The good news about the risen and crucified Jesus has revealed the righteousness of God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

But that’s not all Paul has to say before he moves on. If we grasp the story so far, as Paul has, it ought to move us to praise and Paul now bursts out in praise. But he also knows—just as I’ve found in preaching on what Paul writes here—that not everyone is ready to accept the wisdom of God’s plan as he’s outlined it. And so Paul bursts out into praise of God’s righteousness, but he does so quoting from Isaiah and from Job. Look at what he writes now in 33-36:

**Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.**

Paul has taken us to a mountainside and from there he’s shown us the

¹ *Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), page 690.

whole history of the people of God. The reality is that on a day to day basis, we're still working our way through the valleys that lead to the mountain. It isn't always easy to see where we're headed, but Paul lays it all out before us and we see that God knows what he's doing. That valley leads to this valley and this valley leads to the next, going ever higher. And from this point, above the tree-line, Paul can turn us around and show us the mountaintop. From this vantage point we can finally see what God is doing and why it has to be the way it is. And as much as we've experienced the struggle to cross that river, to climb that ridge, or to scramble up that valley, Paul shows us the grandeur and the glory of it all as it leads to the mountaintop. From here we can see the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. The good news about Jesus, crucified and risen and now Lord of Creation, truly does reveal the righteousness of God.

And Paul quotes first from Isaiah: Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has counselled him? Clearly: no one. It's beyond us. Second-guessing God is what got the human race into trouble in the beginning. It's what turned Creation upside-down and inside-out. It's what made the mess that Jesus is now setting right. But in Jesus we can see God's goodness and faithfulness. We can never fully grasp the depth of his wisdom, but Jesus shows us that we can and should and must trust in him.

And then he quotes a passage from Job. Who has ever given God a gift and expected to be repaid? The sad fact is that many people think they've put God in their debt—that he owes them something because of who they are or what they've done. One friend of mine, almost every time we meet, complains to me: "I give and give and give and God never seems to give back. What's wrong? Have I not given enough?" This attitude is the heart of pagan religion—manipulating

the gods to get what we want and need. And Paul reminds us that this is not who God is. This isn't how it works. To quote Bp. Wright again, "God is in nobody's debt; nobody ever gives God a gift and stands back smug in the knowledge that God must now repay. All is of grace, and only grace; to think otherwise is not to forget merely some fine-tuned or subtle bit of theology, but rather to forget the meaning of the word 'God' itself in the biblical tradition. The God whom Paul has glimpsed in the gospel, whose justice and mercy he has been expounding...is vast and mysterious as the sea, near and intimate as breath, decisive and compassionate as a Galilean holy man on his way to a cruel death. The Wisdom tradition, the prophetic tradition, the Pentateuch, the psalms—all are now poured out in justice and mercy, through the gospel of Jesus the Messiah and the power of the Spirit."²

To this good and wise God Paul sings—and we should be singing with him—this doxology: From him and to him and in him are all things. He is the Creator. He is the one who has come himself in Jesus as Redeemer, full of grace and mercy. And now we see him as the Re-Creator, making all things new. You and I have known, seen, and experienced his grace in Jesus and the Spirit and so we give him glory.

Brothers and Sisters, we glorify God as we submit in faith to Jesus, trusting in his goodness and wisdom as both Saviour and as King. We glorify God as we worship him. We glorify God as we walk in obedience—as the Spirit regenerates and renews our hearts, causing us more and more each day to love God and to love our neighbours. We glorify God as we turn aside from everything that is not him. We glorify God as we put our trust in him instead of the things the world trusts in. We glorify God as we proclaim his royal summons to the world. Repent, for

God's King and God's kingdom have come. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. Live out the truth and the hope of that acclamation each day and you will be giving glory to God.

Let us pray the Collect again: Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: Grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

² Ibid, 696.