

## Romans: The Mystery of Righteousness (part 7 of 7)

The Gifts and Calling are Irrevocable

Romans 11:25-36

Mark Vroegop

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<sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; <sup>27</sup> "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." <sup>28</sup> As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. <sup>29</sup> For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. <sup>33</sup> Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! <sup>34</sup> "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" <sup>35</sup> "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" <sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:25–36 (ESV)

Aurelius Augustine (354-430) loved the sovereignty of God deeply. He famously said: **"Command what you wish, but give what you command."** For Augustine, that statement was more than just a pithy theological reality; it was his salvation. Church historians will tell you that second only to the apostle Paul, there is no other more prominent figure in the shaping of Christianity than Augustine of Hippo. Augustine's understanding of grace was trumpeted by Luther and Calvin, and "grace alone" became the central message of the Reformation.

Augustine knew from personal experience that unless God conquered his heart, there was no hope. For over 15 years he was in bondage to sexual sin, and at age thirty-one God stormed Augustine's heart with what he called sovereign joy.

*How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose...!  
You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure... Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, my Salvation.<sup>1</sup>*

So for Augustine, the sovereignty of God in salvation was the foundation of everything. It defined his view of God, and it became the fuel for righteousness. For Augustine, grace was God giving us

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<sup>1</sup> Confessions IX, 1 as cited in John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy – God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther and Calvin*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2000), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Piper, 57

<sup>3</sup> This ingathering of Israel is not unique to Premillennialism. Both Amillennialism (the belief that the kingdom is

sovereign joy in God that triumphs over joy in sin.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the beauty of “grace-alone” is not just its singularity, but also its power. “Grace-alone” means “God-alone.” Or to say it another way: “from Him, through Him and to Him are all things.” This is the traumatic beauty of the teaching of Romans 9-11. It is the clearest and most compelling text in the Bible as it relates to the sovereignty of God.

### **The Argument of Romans 9-11**

Today we conclude our seven-message study of these three chapters. I am sad to bid them farewell, but we have some very important and extremely chapters that await us during the month of June and this Fall. We began our journey on March 8, so let me remind you about the argument of these chapters with four key statements:

1. The main question of Romans 9-11 is how can the promises of God in Romans 8 be trusted since the promises made about Israel have not come true.
2. The answer to this objection is an appeal to God’s sovereignty, a complete reliance on His grace. This is worked out through divine election whereby a Jewish remnant is saved and Gentiles are welcomed into God’s people. Two key verses in this regard are:

*<sup>6</sup> But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel...<sup>16</sup> So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy (Romans 9:6,16).*

3. And the hope is that God will give Israel future grace fulfilling His promises to her, and this gives us assurance about how He works and leads us to worship.

So Romans 9-11 shows us the mystery of God’s righteousness by looking at His redemptive work as it relates to Israel and the Gentiles. However, this very complicated and challenging passage is not fundamentally about Israel or the Gentiles. It is about God, His sovereignty, and His conquering grace. These chapters show us the beauty of God’s mercy as storms the citadel of our sinful hearts and captivates us with the grace that is found in Jesus Christ.

When you understand what God did in that moment, it leaves you in awe as you realize that you have nothing unless it is from God and through God. And ultimately the sovereignty of God leads you to worship. You move from being wooed to wonder to “wow” and then to worship. Theology is meant to lead to doxology. Knowing God leads to loving God.

### **A Memorable Summary: “From, Through, and To Him!”**

There is a great summary of the heart and the message of Romans 9-11 in 9:36. I think it captures the essence of the gospel and central message of Romans 9-11 – “from God, through God, and to God.” In other words everything that a believer has in Christ has its source in who God is. Everything that happens in salvation only takes place through God and His grace. And the ultimate goal and purpose of this divine plan is to proclaim the majestic name of God over all the earth (Rom 9:17).

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<sup>2</sup> Piper, 57

“From Him, through Him and to Him” is really the essence of the Christian life. And an opposite mentality – “from me, through me, and to me” – is the fundamental problem with mankind and why hell exists. So let’s use this framework to look at this last section in Romans.

### **From Him: God’s Promises (vv. 25-27)**

What is the future of the nation of Israel? Has she been permanently cut off from God’s mercy? That is the question that is front and center in chapters 9-11, and we see it emerge here again. Paul once again picks up this theme, and he specifically addresses Gentiles. And he points them to the promises of God. Israel’s only hope for the future is God’s promise.

Paul begins by once again warning the Gentiles about being arrogant toward Israel. This caution began in 11:18, and it relates to the temptation that grace-receiving Gentiles might look down on Israel because of her rejection of the Messiah and her “broken-off” / unbelieving status (Rom. 11:20).

In verses 25-27 Paul moves beyond a simple warning about arrogance, and he points them toward the future plan that God has for Israel. He wants them to know that there are promises yet to be fulfilled as it relates to Israel. The well of “from Him” has not dried up.

What does this future look like? Let’s read the text to find out:

*<sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved... (Romans 11:25–26)*

Essentially the promise here is that while a partial hardening has fallen upon the nation of Israel, the effect of the Gentile mission will be a future salvation for “all Israel.” In other words, God is not finished with His plan to save the people of Israel.

Paul uses the word “mystery” to capture the essence of this plan. The word does not mean something that cannot ever be known or understood. Rather, it captures how God’s ways are not always clearly known to humans until it is revealed. Mystery here is meant to direct us toward how awe-inspiring God’s plans and ways are. The Gentiles should not glory in themselves but in God.

The plan of God involves three key aspects: 1) a partial hardening of Israel, 2) a mission of salvation opened to the Gentiles, and 3) a sweeping salvation of “all Israel.” It is the third aspect, the salvation of all Israel, that is the essence of the promise. However, this is not an easy concept to understand. Let me explain why and then tell you what I think it means.

There are four ways to take the term “all Israel.”

- There are those who believe that Paul is referring to a spiritualized Israel. In other words, he is referring here to the church which includes both Jews and Gentiles. The reason for this is because there are many texts that refer to the church in this kind of language. For instance Galatians 3:9 refers to believers as “the sons of Abraham” and Galatians 6:16 to the church as “the Israel of God.” The problem, however, is that Romans 9-11 is clearly referring to more than a spiritualized Israel.

There is ethnic distinction, especially between Jew and Gentile, all over Romans 9-11. To spiritualize Israel in this section really reduces the strength of Paul's argument and message.

- Others take "all Israel" to mean the remnant of Jews who believe. The problem here is that Romans 11 offers the hope of something more or a climatic event in the future. If "all Israel" is just the remnant, then it does not seem very promising.
- Another view is to take "all Israel" to mean every Jewish person ever born in human history. This view really emphasizes the word "all." However, the problem is that this view suggests that people who never received Christ in their lifetime can be saved by some other means.
- The final view, which I think is the best, is to see "all Israel" as a promise to ethnic and national Israel where there will be a future day in which features a massive evangelism of the Jewish people. The promise of the future is that near the end-times there will be such a widespread Jewish reception of their Messiah that Israel will be as characterized by belief as she is now characterized by unbelief.

Given my understanding of the end-times, I believe that this will happen prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ, during the Tribulation, and will lead to the Millennial Kingdom where the promises made to Israel will come to full fruition as a nation and in the promised land.<sup>3</sup>

Be careful to not get overly caught up in the "when" aspect here. The key point in Romans 11 is to see the "what" that is going to happen. Paul envisions a day when Israel as a people are gloriously turned back to their Messiah and the New Covenant reaches its ultimate fulfillment. That is why Paul quotes a mix of Isaiah 59:20, 27:9, and Jeremiah 31:33 in verses 26-27:

*"...as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob";<sup>27</sup> "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins" (Romans 11:26-27)*

The beautiful and stunning promise here is that there is coming a day when Jesus will remove the unbelief from Israel and grant them faith to believe. There is coming a day when God is going to give them, as a people, a new heart, write the law of God inside of them, fill them with his Spirit, and they will never again be estranged from him. God will be with them, and they will be his people. Just listen to the promise in Jeremiah 32!

*<sup>37</sup> Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety.<sup>38</sup> And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.<sup>39</sup> I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.<sup>40</sup> I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.<sup>41</sup> I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.<sup>42</sup> "For thus says the*

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<sup>3</sup> This ingathering of Israel is not unique to Premillennialism. Both Amillennialism (the belief that the kingdom is already present through the church) and Post-Millennialism (the belief that Christ returns after the Millennial kingdom) believe that some kind of Jewish evangelism takes place.

*LORD: Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them. (Jeremiah 32:37-42)*

In other words, Israel's only hope is God! Their deliverance will only come from God himself. But is there any greater hope than that? One day, God will conquer His people's hearts. They will be saved because God has done it.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you love the sound of that, don't you? As you think back on your life and how you came to faith in Christ, I think you can see how God was working behind the scenes in and through it all. God used people, circumstances, the preaching of the gospel or maybe even pain as a wonderful messenger sent from Him to awaken your heart to the gospel. I was talking with a nurse this week who told me that God used a divorce in her 30's to awaken her heart to the need to receive Jesus. That's what God can do. That is what he still does. God works in surprising ways.

If you are not a Christian yet, you need to know that the events in your life are not accidentally arranged. God is at work in everything – both the good and the bad. And all of them are meant to point you toward Him by showing you how much you need what He offers you through the person and work of Jesus. The message of hope starts with understanding that everything you need comes only from Him.

### **Through Him: God's Plan (vv. 28-32)**

The second theme in this text is the way in which God works. He is more than just the source of everything, He is the means by which all things take place. All things are from Him and all things are through Him. God is at work, executing his plan for mercy. And because of that, we can have great assurance.

In verse 28 Paul summarizes the position of Israel in light of her present unbelief and the future we just discussed in verses 25-27:

*<sup>28</sup> As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. Romans 11:28 (ESV)*

There are two stories with Israel. At the present time, she is an enemy of the gospel. But God still has a plan for her, and she is loved by God. Israel's rejection of her messiah is not the final chapter. There's more to come, but not because of Israel's faithfulness. No! It is only because of God.

The security of God's plan is highlighted in verse with a bold and hopeful statement: "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Each word is important:

- **Gifts** – This is referring back to all the gracious gifts that God gave to Israel which we read about in 9:4 – "To them belong adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises." Israel was and is God's chosen people.
- **Calling** – Paul is identifying the effectual call to salvation that was a part of God's relationship with Israel. They were a people "holy to the Lord," a "chosen people," and those upon whom God had set His love (see Deut. 7:6-7). This was a part of Israel's foundation and history.

- **Irrevocable** – The promise of God to His people is not ultimately based upon their actions but on God. The promise to Abraham was guaranteed by God himself. God was the one who walked through the pieces of animals in Genesis 15. So salvation of Israel during the last days will be the fulfillment of the irrevocable promises of God.

In the church tradition from which College Park was birthed, we would often hear about the assurance of our salvation. This means that we believe that “once saved, always saved,” or that no one could pluck us out of the Father’s hand (John 10:29). But why? It is just because we remember the moment we received Christ as savior? Is it because we know the date when we became a Christian? Is it because we really, truly believed – that it felt very real? While remembering the moment, the date, and being very genuine are all commendable, the real reason why there is assurance is because it was a work of God.

God saved you! He conquered your heart, and you are not able to undo His work any more than you can redo your physical birth. Jesus described conversion as being born again in John 3 for this very reason. Birth is what is done **to** you. God is the means by which we are born again. And since it is His work, it is irrevocable. Once you are genuinely saved, you are always saved.

Last week we talked about the problem of a hard heart. I do believe that believers in Jesus can succumb to the deceitfulness of sin and develop a temporarily hardened heart. The effect of which is the disciplining hand of God. Believers can become self-deceived, but not forever. So a partial hardening can affect a believer.

A permanently hardened heart is someone who had never experienced the grace of Christ through faith. It is not as though they were neutral to God. Rather, their heart merely kept following its own desires, passions, and dreams. It is a person who lives with the philosophy of “from me, through me and to me are all things!” And the ultimate expression of this heart is the unwillingness to listen to any other voice but their own.

The point of all this is simply that there is no lasting change or hope apart for the concept of “through him.” The irrevocableness of God’s plan and His love means that as long as we have breath in our lungs there is hope. Look at verses 30-32.

*<sup>30</sup> For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Romans 11:30–32 (ESV)*

What is Paul saying here in these verses? After grounding the gospel in the irrevocable plan of God, he points out that disobedience – even national disobedience – does not circumvent God’s plan. Waywardness, rebellion, and a consistent pattern of rejecting God are no match for God’s grace.

That is extremely important if you have a family member who is characterized, right now, by a hardened heart. You see their actions, their blindness, and the unfolding tragedy of their lives, and you might be tempted to give up. You could think, “They are too far gone.” But this text reminds us

that God is able to remove a heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. He is able to open their blind eyes. One day He is going to take the blinders off his beloved's eyes, and the turning of Israel to Christ will be so great that we'll say, "All Israel is saved."

So if your husband, wife, mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, friend, co-worker, or neighbor seems hardened, keep praying, keep pleading, keep asking. Because God is bigger than their disobedience. If he did it with fisherman, tax-collectors, prostitutes, religious leaders, political leaders, persecutors, and a thief on the cross. There is no sin so great or lifestyle so engrained that God cannot conquer it. There is no evil which cannot be transformed and forgiven "through him."

All things are from him and all things are through him.

### **To Him: God's Glory (vv. 33-36)**

The third and final theme is not only the conclusion to this pericope, but it is also the conclusion of Romans 9-11. For that matter, it really is the conclusion of the entire Bible and human history. God's dealing with Israel is not just about Israel. It shows us something very important about who He is as God. It shows us the beauty of his grace.

This is where theology leads to doxology. Romans 9-11 has some pretty "heady" topics, but when you see what they truly are and when you allow the biblical tensions to simply co-exist, you see the beauty of God in a new light.

Verses 33-36 feature two exclamations, three questions, and our summary statement. All of them platform the depth of God's plan to save his people.

#### ***Two Exclamations***

Verse 33 begins with "Oh" which is a marker for an emotionally laden statement. What follows is praise of the either 1) the depth of the riches, wisdom and knowledge of God (ESV) or 2) the depth of the riches of wisdom and knowledge of God (NASB). Whether there are two or three things praised here, the point is the same. Namely, God's supply of mercy and grace is unbelievable. There is a depth and a richness to the mind and heart of God that is mind-blowing.

The second exclamation speaks directly to the fact that God's ways are not our ways. Romans 9-11 has shown us that God is doing things that are beyond our ability to understand (unsearchable) and beyond our ability to judge or evaluate (inscrutable). God is beyond us. Or, taking a line from our Exodus series: "God likes us but he is not like us."

#### ***Three Questions***

Paul brings further emotional energy to this ending by asking three rhetorical questions. The answer is the same for each question: "No one." The first question relates to the knowing the mind of God, the second question to giving God advice, and the third to whether God can ever be in our debt.

- "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" Answer: No one.

- “Who has ever been his counselor?” Answer: No one
- “Who has ever given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” Answer: No one.

### **Summary**

What’s the point? Romans 9-11 shows us clearly that God’s minds, God’s ways, God’s plans, and God’s very being are completely and totally “other.” And it takes texts like these or deep sufferings to show us the beauty of God’s “other-ness.” Listen to Job’s reflection on God after considering all that he does in creation:

*<sup>14</sup> Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?” Job 26:14 (ESV)*

The hymn-writer, Fredrick Lehman, captures the wide, expansive marveling that happens when you think upon the length, depth, and beauty of God’s love.

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made;  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade;  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

What is the aim of Romans 9-11? It is give you a brief glimpse of the beauty of God’s ways. It is to point you away from yourself, away from your sin, and to set you free from the captivity of unbelief. It is to woo you to the truth of the gospel that is found in Jesus Christ. So that these words flow from a redeemed heart and mouth:

**“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.”**

Romans 9-11 shows us that the center of the center of the universe and the most beautiful reality of all beautiful realities is God! That from, through, and to are some of the most important words in the world when they are followed by “Him” and not “me.” From him. Through Him. To Him! To Him be glory forever and ever. This is the mystery of righteousness.

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