

By God's Mercy and His Mercy Alone
Romans 11:25-36 August 21, 2011

Paul is wrapping up his discussion of how Israel and the church are related. Last week we looked at the image Paul used of an olive tree. He said that the Gentiles were grafted as wild branches onto the cultivated tree that is Israel. He encouraged us not to look down on Israel as if we are superior because, if they had not rejected Jesus, salvation may not have come to the Gentiles. In other words, even their rejection was all part of God's plan.

Paul reinforces that idea this with this morning's text. Because the hardening of the hearts of Israel serves a purpose, once that purpose is accomplished, the hardening will end. Paul wrote, "*I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.*" (v.25) God only causes pain and turmoil that are necessary. This is something we talked about as we discussed the creation on Tuesday mornings over a couple of weeks several weeks ago. We often look at the world and see pain and misery and wonder why God would allow it to be like this. For God's purposes, however, even with all the suffering, this world is the **best** world there could be. As the Gathiers wrote in their song, "Through It All," if we never had any problems, we wouldn't know that God could solve them. This world not only showcases God's power and majesty, it also demonstrates His love and mercy in ways no other world could.

God's purpose in hardening the hearts of the Israelites against Jesus was that the gospel might spread among the Gentiles and that, through jealousy, Israel would come back to the message that had come from them. Once that purpose is completed, then the hardening will end. Once all the Gentiles that will be saved are saved, then the eyes and hearts of the Israelites

will be opened and they will see the Messiah who was given to them so long ago. As we saw last week, this is cause for us to not get conceited. We are no better than Israel was. We would not have accepted Jesus either had God not softened our hearts and brought us to Him. We are only saved by God's mercy so we are in no position to look down on those to whom that mercy has not yet been extended. We should not gloat over Israel, or anyone else outside of Christ, as if we are smarter or wiser than they. We should recognize that the only difference between us and those outside of Christ is **God's** gracious decision to save us in spite of ourselves.

This understanding that the hardening will be lifted led Paul to make a statement that surprises us and has left people scratching their heads for millennia. "*And so all Israel will be saved . . .*" (v.26) What, exactly, does Paul mean by this?

Does this mean that everyone who has ever been a descendant of Israel will be saved? No, it cannot mean that because Paul has already said several times that they will not be. He offered to be cursed himself if it meant all his Jewish brothers would be saved.

Does it mean that all those who are saved are Israel, and all those who are not saved are not Israel? This carries a little more weight. Paul did redefine Israel several weeks back when he said, "*It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'* In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." (Romans 9:6-8) Many have taken this to mean that the church is the new Israel. Paul would then mean that all the church will be saved. But this doesn't make any sense either. It is a tautology. One definition of the church is "those who are saved." What sense does it

make to say, “all the church will be saved?” Besides, this position has another, bigger, problem. Paul has been talking about the relationship between Israel and the church. He has been looking at the potential impact of the new covenant on the old promises. Israel and the church cannot be the same thing because he has taken such pains to differentiate between them and show us how they relate to one another. As attractive as the idea sounds, it is not the case that the church is the new Israel, at least not in the context of salvation history that Paul is talking about here.

So, if it's not the case that every Israelite through all time will be saved, and it's not the case that the church is the new Israel, what does Paul mean when he says, “all Israel will be saved?” We find the solution in the timing. We have already seen that it waits until the full number of Gentiles has come in. Let's look at the warrant Paul finds for it in the Old Testament. Referring to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah Paul wrote, “*The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.*” (vv.26,27) Paul is looking forward to the time when the **Deliverer** will return. When the end comes, God will lift the hardening He has placed on the hearts of Israel in order to draw the Gentiles, and Israel will turn back to Him. What God has done to save the Gentiles He will undo so that Israel might be saved.

Paul continues with this thought. Speaking to the Gentiles in the church, and of Israel, Paul wrote “*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, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.*” (vv.28,29) So, unbelieving Israel are enemies to the Gentiles' benefit. Again, this does not give us reason to burn down synagogues and attack Jews. That is not what Paul means by “enemies,” though it is true that the Jews of his time were actively

leading persecution of the church. While there is the sense of physical animosity, Paul really is setting Israel against the church here in the sense of the history of God's saving activity in the world. He has already said that the Gentiles could only be brought into God's kingdom and relationship with the Jewish Messiah because the Jews had rejected that Messiah and all who would follow Him. Israel is the church's enemy in a spiritual sense much more than it is in a physical sense. Besides, we are called to love and pray for our enemies, not persecute them in return.

Perhaps more to the point, Paul might not even mean that Israel is our enemy. Perhaps he means that they are enemies of God on our account. Again, God hardened them so that the Gentiles might come in, but only so that the Gentiles might come in.

God's **choice** is still sovereign. Just as He chose against Israel for a time, He is free to chose them again, and He will. Israel is still part of God's elect and so, of only because of the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, and so many others, God will continue to preserve a remnant and Israel, as a people will be saved. God's call cannot be revoked. His promises never fail. If God could fail in the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then He could fail in the promises He made to us to be with us to the end of the age and to bring us into His kingdom. Thank God he keeps His promises! God chose Israel and that election still stands.

So, Israel will be saved when the end comes. This leaves one question: on what basis will they be saved? Paul answers, “*Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, 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. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.*” (vv.30-32) They will be saved on

the same basis we were, and on which every person who has every been saved has been saved. We were disobedient and following our will instead of God's and He had mercy on us. Now, Israel is disobedient so that they too may know that their salvation comes from God's mercy and not their own righteousness! They will see how their righteousness based on the law has fallen short and they will seek God's mercy and find it. God has brought all people through a time of disobedience in order that all may know they are saved by God's **mercy** and by His mercy alone. This is true for both Israel and the Gentiles alike. All who come to God, under the old covenant or the new, can only come because of His mercy. No matter how much we try to pretend, there is no other way.

Once the Gentiles are brought in, God will remove the hardening He has placed on the hearts of Israel, and Israel will turn to the Messiah. Not all of them will, but a significant portion will stop rejecting Jesus and believe in the One whom God has sent to take away the sins, not of the Jews only, but of all who turn to Him throughout the world. God brought the knowledge of Him and a relationship with Him through Israel, but they need to know that they are only His tools because of His mercy. All are disobedient, and before we can fully understand what God has done for us, we need to fully understand how undeserving of it we are. As Jesus pointed out, the people who are most aware of how much He has forgiven in them are the ones who love Him the most. We can't fall on God's mercy and know His salvation as long as we keep pretending that we are good and that we deserve His blessing. This is a problem with a lot of preaching today. It's not that there isn't enough of the gospel. It's that there isn't enough of man's sin. God is driving Israel into the disobedience that is in their hearts so that they will recognize their condition and run to Him for His mercy.

This thought of God's mercy given to the disobedient, this idea that God should save everyone on the same basis of His grace, led Paul to cry out in praise. As Paul taught about God's love and mercy he often stopped to pause and thank God for offering salvation and to proclaim just how great our God is. This next section is one of those times. The fact that salvation, for Israel and Gentiles alike, is by God's mercy and His mercy alone led Paul to exclaim:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom
and knowledge of God!*

*How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!*

“Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?”

*“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?”*

*For from him and through him and to him
are all things.*

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

(vv.33-36)

What a wonderful hymn of praise in response to God's mercy in saving the disobedient. Nobody can come to God on his or her own merits, and God has determined it be that way. If we could earn our way to heaven we would have something about which to boast and there would be another way to salvation outside of God's grace. Yet God, in His wisdom and knowledge, has determined that the only way we may come to Him is through His mercy and grace. We cannot know the depths of His judgements. We can only know of His paths what He has chosen to reveal to us. His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are His ways our ways. He does not seek our advice, nor can we tell Him something He does not already know. We cannot give Him anything that places Him in our debt. Indeed, we can

only give Him ourselves, and we can only do that because He has already given Himself to us. We cannot out-think Him. We cannot outmaneuver Him. We cannot out-give Him. Indeed, it is only in and through Him that we have anything at all. All things exist because of Him. All things exist in Him. All things exist to His praise and to demonstrate His creative power and might. To Him, and to Him alone belongs all praise and glory forever!

To this Paul adds his “amen.” There is none greater than God. There is none beside God. He is the Creator. All else is dependant on Him. All that we see and all that we are come about by His power and majesty.

Even in light of all this, God has decreed that all humanity will be disobedient. We will all be brought to the end of ourselves and, either in this life or the next, will come to understand the depth of our depravity and the horror of our rebellion against a holy and righteous God. Still, God has decreed this so that all who will be saved will be saved by God’s mercy and His mercy alone! Praise be to our God!