

God's Unsearchable Ways

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[0 : 00] Pray that you may do so now through these words, that you may write your word on our hearts, that we may believe it and do it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. People are passionate about Israel. Perhaps more than any country I visited, there was a great excitement in me when I first arrived in Israel.

Not just because it's the land of Jesus and the land of the Bible, not just because I was finally in places which I'd read about for many years, but also because of the excitement of the people who are there and the feeling of some kinship with Jewish people with whom we Christians share a common heritage and root in the Old Testament.

Although, having said that, and despite that, there is also a great feeling of sadness and sympathy for the Palestinians' plight in that country as well.

People are passionate about Israel. In 1948, the modern state of Israel was established. In the wake of the Holocaust and the Second World War, though the roots of the search to establish a Jewish home state go back into the late 1800s at least.

[1 : 19] And in the 1940s and since, many Christians, particularly from the United States of America, have poured millions of dollars into the establishment of the state of Israel.

For some of them, their reasons for doing so stem from their reading of the Bible that the establishment of Israel and the regathering of Jewish people from around the world represented some fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and indeed perhaps the New Testament as well.

For some, the re-establishment of a Jewish state would perhaps usher in a Messianic age or prompt the return of the Messiah. For some, they believe that the establishment of the state of Israel would lead to the conversion of Jews by placing their faith in Jesus.

Although for others, they believe that evangelizing Jews was, or is, anti-Semitic and that Jews are saved by virtue of being Jewish. What ought we expect?

People are passionate about Israel. When I lived in England a few years ago, I ran a one-day seminar on the Old Testament. We'd advertised it locally and a number of people who were Christians, though not racially Jews, but were ardent about Israel and Jewish things, came and in effect, in my opinion, sought to hijack the seminar by keeping on raising and pushing issues about modern Israel fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.

[3 : 01] People are passionate about Israel. What do we expect for them, for Israelites, for Jews? By and large, in our day, as in Paul's day, 2,000 years ago, few Jews, though some, but few generally, become Christian.

In Paul's day, as in our own, by and large, the Jewish people reject the Messiah, Jesus. Does that mean, then, that God has finally rejected the Israelite or Jewish people?

This issue has been, is not new here in Romans 11. It's not as though Paul has just started a completely new topic. Throughout Paul's letter to the Romans, he has been talking about the gospel and the implications of the gospel for the church in Rome.

And one of the significant issues of that church, like most of the churches in the first century, were the relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish Christian people. And it seems that there was disputes and perhaps differences between those two groups in the church in Rome.

And Paul's exposition of the gospel in the letter to the Romans has consistently brought up Jew and Gentile on an equal footing before God. There is no distinction. They stand under God's wrath.

[4 : 18] They stand under the same means of salvation through faith in Jesus. Now in chapters 9 to 11, the passage we're looking at today is the end of that section. Paul comes down to deal specifically with the issue, has God rejected the Jewish people?

It looks like it in Paul's day. But he begins the chapter by saying, by no means. Has God rejected his people? By no means. Not at all. An emphatic no.

And he gives two illustrations of why he answers in that way. Firstly, himself, he, Paul, was a Jew as well as now a Christian.

Indeed, he says in the end of verse 1, he's an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. That's just part of his credentials as a Jew. So God has not rejected his people because Paul, at least, is an example of God not rejecting Jewish people, holus bolus.

His second example comes from the Old Testament. He mentions the example of Elijah, one of the great prophets, 950, 850 BC. Elijah believed that he was the only person left in the land of Israel who was faithful to Yahweh and had not turned after and worshipped other gods.

[5 : 35] But God's words to Elijah, as Paul mentions them in verse 4, is that, I have kept for myself 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

Notice there that it's not 7,000 who've chosen not to go after the Baals, but God who's kept for himself 7,000. That God has preserved and protected, it's God's initiative at work, he's protected and preserved 7,000 Israelites who've been faithful to him, along with Elijah.

So in Paul's case, one of just a few Israelites with faith in Jesus, in Elijah's case, just one of a few within the nation who are faithful to God, there is a remnant within the total Israelite population, if you see what I mean, who have been faithful to God.

That remnant Paul talks about in verses 5 and 6, so too at the present time there is a remnant, Paul is part of that, who are chosen by grace.

If it is by grace, then it's no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace. Consistently in this letter, as indeed elsewhere in scripture, we see that the only people who are ever saved are saved by grace.

[6 : 54] They do not deserve it, or earn it, or merit it. And nobody is saved because of their race. So nobody is saved because they are racially descended from Abraham, and are therefore an Israelite or a Jew.

Whether Jewish or not, a person who is saved is saved by God's grace alone. Nothing about them qualifies them for belonging to the people of God.

And descent from Abraham does not guarantee right of entry into God's kingdom or heaven. But conversely, if God does not extend grace to somebody, and after all, he's only extended it, it seems, to a small remnant of Israelite people in Paul's day, as in our own, then he hardens the rest.

So Paul says in verse 7, what then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, the chosen ones of God, that is, but the rest were hardened.

By God, that is. Now we may think that's unfair, but we've already seen in chapter 9 that God does harden people such as the Pharaoh, king of Egypt at the time of Moses, and that that is fair.

[8 : 14] Pharaoh did not deserve God's mercy, nor do Israelites generally deserve God's mercy. In fact, nobody deserves God's mercy, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. So it's perfectly fair for God to harden hearts of sinful, stubborn people.

nobody deserves the mercy that he offers to the few. Paul quotes now the Old Testament to back up this case that God has hardened Israelite or Jewish hearts.

He quotes firstly from the early part of the Old Testament from Deuteronomy, the same book he quoted in chapter 10, God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear down to this very day, and Paul is saying not only down to Moses' day, but down to Paul's day, that is the case.

God has not enabled them to come to have faith and trust in him. And then he quotes David later in Old Testament history in the 900s BC from one of the Psalms.

Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see and keep their backs bent forever.

[9 : 27] In essence, why Paul quotes those two passages is to show that the Old Testament itself acknowledged that God hardened his own people's hearts through their history and Paul is saying it is still the same in his day.

But why does God do that? Why does God harden somebody's heart? especially the heart of one of his chosen people. In what follows, Paul has a sequence of ways in which God works in history.

He makes promises to his people but they do not believe them and he hardens their heart. In consequence to that, the gospel promises of God go to non-Jewish people.

In response to that, the people of God, the Israelites or the Jewish people are provoked to jealousy that the Gentiles are included and that ultimately Paul is going to say here will bring about the conversion of some or even many of those Israelite or Jewish people.

He outlines that schema four times in the passages that follow. It seems a bit of an unusual way to go about things. We'll come to that at the end of the chapter.

[10 : 48] But let's see how Paul expounds that sequence promises of God to the Israelite or Jewish people who reject them. Then God brings in the non-Jewish Gentile people.

The Israelites then are jealous about that and ultimately they will come into God's people again in faith. In verses 11 and 12 Paul asks have they the Israelites stumbled so as to fall?

That is, is their rejection of God, their stumbling, remember he used that expression in chapter 9 about stumbling on the Messiah, the stone or rock, is that a permanent fall?

No, he says, but through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean?

That is, the sequence Paul is saying here is that God's promises went to Jewish people, they stumbled over those promises, that led to salvation coming to the Gentiles, the Israelites getting jealous and then ultimately their inclusion in faith back into the people of God.

[12 : 04] That is the first time Paul is going through that scheme of verses 11 and 12. And we must bear in mind this is no different from what Jesus himself said in the Gospels about how the fact that many descendants of Abraham would not believe and trust in him but that many Gentiles would and so on.

And indeed it's the pattern that we see in the Acts of the Apostles when Paul goes and preaches in a place for example preaches to Jews first they reject him he preaches to Gentiles many believe it provokes hostility or jealousy from the Jews.

The bit that Paul's adding on here is that at the end of that schema some of those Israelite or Jewish people will come back in in faith. The second time Paul goes through that schema of things is verses 13 to 16 this time in the context of his own ministry.

Now I'm speaking to you Gentiles in as much then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles I glorify my ministry that is he is grateful as a Jew to have a ministry to the Gentiles of the Gospel but not just for the Gentiles sake he says in verse 14 in order to make my own people jealous and thus save some of them.

so Paul is happy to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles because they need it and they'll respond with salvation and he's also happy to preach to the Gentiles because it will make the Jewish people jealous and it will provoke some of them to salvation as well.

[13 : 28] For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world that is the rejection by Jews leads to reconciliation for Gentiles what will their acceptance be but life from the dead.

if the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy then the whole batch is holy. If the root is holy then the branches are holy and Paul is saying there is a small remnant himself included of Jewish people who have believed in the Messiah Jesus.

That is the first fruits or the root and it means that ultimately that many from descendants of Abraham will believe. Well the third time that Paul gives this schema ago verses 17 to 24 and this time he uses the analogy of an olive tree.

Now as you know or many of you know I am not a green hand. I am no great expert in the garden let me tell you. I am not very good at identifying weeds from things that are not weeds and don't put pruning shears in my hands because I wouldn't really know what to do with them or when in the year to do it.

For many centuries people have ridiculed St. Paul here. thinking that he had no clue either about horticultural matters because he talks here about an olive tree breaking off branches of it and grafting in a wild olive branch into this cultivated tree and then beyond that re-grafting in cultivated branches.

[14 : 56] They say well Paul's got no idea what he's talking about here. Well in one sense it doesn't matter. It's just an illustration. But in the last hundred years people who've researched ancient olive trees and how you deal with them or people did then have found that exactly what Paul talks about here is what people did with olive trees then.

If an olive tree was beginning to flag in its production then a way of stimulating it was to graft in a wild branch that would stimulate the sap or something, I don't know all these technical terms, and make the tree more productive and then indeed sometimes you would re-graft in some of the original cultivated branches apparently.

So Paul's illustration here not only fits the point but actually fits the practice of dealing with olive trees back in the ancient world. Well let's see what he says then in verses 17 to 24.

If some of the branches were broken off and you a wild olive shoot, he's talking to Gentiles remember, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree.

In mind here is that Israel and the Old Testament Israel Jewish people is the olive tree, that's an Old Testament illustration itself from the prophets that Paul is building on. He's saying the Gentiles are like the wild branch that's been grafted into this olive tree.

[16 : 22] Some of the branches of the original tree have been broken off through lack of faith and unbelief is the implication of what he's saying. But the point here is to say to the Gentiles, Christians in Rome, don't boast.

Verse 18. And probably what's going on in the Roman church is that there are some Jewish Christians and mainly Gentile Christians and they are boastful about the fact that the promises of God have come to them.

As though God's rejected you Jewish people. We don't want to have anything to do with you. You're second rate. You've rejected the Messiah. We are the more important. Paul's saying don't boast that you are a Gentile Christian.

And he goes on to say in verse 18, if you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. So for Gentile Christians, like most of us here, I guess are, we must not forget our roots, our Jewish or Israelite going back to Abraham and the promises of God to him.

That's part of the reason of the excitement of going to Israel, I think, and seeing people with whom we share a kindred root, in a sense, in the promises to Abraham.

[17 : 38] He goes on to say in verse 19, you will say, branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in. And that is true. But they were broken off because of their unbelief.

But you stand only through faith. That is, don't think you Gentiles are thereby right because you deserve it, you merit it, or you're better than the Jews. They were broken off through their unbelief.

But you're only there through faith, not through your own achievement, or ability, or moral prowess, or something like that. For if God did not spare, sorry, the end of verse 20, so do not become proud, but stand in awe.

Or fear, we might translate that. The antidote to pride is fear of God. So as a Gentile Christian grafted into the promises of God to Abraham, we are to stand in fear of God.

Because God has broken off the branches of unbelief from the racial descendants of Abraham, and if God did not spare them, verse 21, the natural branches, then perhaps God will not spare you.

[18 : 48] If you give up faith, he'll break you off, is what Paul is saying. Don't be proud, but stand in fear of God. Note then, he says, the kindness and the severity of God.

Severity to those who've fallen, the branches he's broken off, but God's kindness towards you Gentiles, a kindness that is mercy or grace, provided you continue in his kindness, otherwise you also will be cut off.

This is not unlike what Paul says in 1 Corinthians, if you think you're standing firm, be careful lest you fall. And for all of us, that is a timely warning.

Even those of Israel, he says in verse 23, if they do not persist in unbelief, but will be grafted in. That is, they may be in unbelief now and broken off out of the olive tree, but if they change from unbelief to belief in the Messiah, Jesus, then they'll be grafted back in.

That is, their stumbling is not permanent. Their fall is not permanent. They could yet be brought back in if they come to faith in Jesus. For if you have been cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, that is, the Gentiles brought into the people of God, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree?

[20 : 13] That is, it's a more difficult thing in a sense to bring a Gentile into the people of God who've got heritage, going back to Abraham and Jewish people. It's much easier, in fact, to graft in an Israelite who's been broken off through unbelief, but now will be brought back in through faith in Christ.

Well, that's the third time that Paul goes through this schema of promises to Israel, Israel's rejection, that leads to the gospel and salvation to Gentiles, Israel provoked to jealousy, and some at least of them coming back in in faith and being saved.

The fourth time comes from verse 25 onwards. So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery.

And these words have been quite controversial over the years. A hardening has come upon part of Israel. Not all, Paul's an example of someone who's come to faith.

Until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved. Now some translate or interpret that part of the end of that quote, so all Israel will be saved, to mean that just because a Jew is a Jew descended from Abraham, they are and will be saved.

[21 : 33] Some think that it means that every single Jew will be saved because they'll come to faith in Jesus. But what I think Paul has in mind here is along the lines of what he said back in chapter 9 at the beginning, we saw three weeks ago.

Not every Israelite truly belongs to Israel. That is, the true Israel are people of faith in Jesus Christ. Whether or not they're racially descended from Abraham, or they might be Gentiles, the true Israel is not the ethnic descendants of Abraham.

The true Israel, as Paul said in chapter 4, are those who share the faith of Abraham. And so all Israel will be saved, Gentile and Jew, who place their faith in Jesus.

The right number, because God is sovereign, and he extends mercy to whomever he chooses to extend mercy. What Paul is expecting here when he says, so all Israel will be saved, we see in a vision in the book of Revelation.

There in chapter 7, we see a number that John is told, 144,000 who have been sealed from every tribe of Israel. When John looks at what he's told about, he sees a multitude that nobody can number from every nation and race and tongue.

[22 : 59] There's the same group of people described in different ways. All Israel being saved is the perfect number because God is sovereign and no one will be left out by mistake.

And they come from every race and nation and tongue, Jewish and non-Jewish. That's what Paul expects, that at the end of history, God will bring the full number of those who are his elect, his chosen, to be saved.

The deliverer, he mentions at the end of verse 26, is Jesus. Out of Zion, a name for Jerusalem, here I think meaning the heavenly Jerusalem, Jesus will come, the deliverer, at the end of history, when he returns to bring about God's heaven.

He will banish ungodliness from Jacob, another way of describing Israelites, and this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins. That is the new covenant that the Old Testament anticipated, described in the prophets.

Paul here is anticipating Jesus' return at the end of history, when all of God's people will be saved and through faith in him. But currently, he says in verse 28, as regards the gospel, now many Israelites and as a whole the Israelites or the Jews are enemies of God.

[24 : 20] But they're enemies of God for your sake, for the Gentiles' sake, so that you have opportunity to come to faith in Jesus. But as regards election, their beloved as a whole, for the sake of their ancestors, the promises God made to Abraham.

They're not rejected finally by God, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Now you may well think, and rightly and fairly so, I guess, that this seems an odd way for God to go about saving his people.

Why is it that he makes promises to one group of people, whom he then hardens so they don't believe them, so he then extends the promises to other people, but in doing so provokes the original group of people to jealousy and brings them in?

Why is it so complicated and convoluted really, like that? I think we get a glimpse of an answer in the verses that follow. Basically the simple answer is this, God hardens people and contrives this way of salvation to Jew and non-Jew in order to make his mercy obvious.

You see, the Jews of Paul's day thought they had a priority on salvation. They believed that because they were racially descended from Abraham, they had a right to heaven, in effect.

[25 : 41] And the Gentiles in Paul's day, when they see the Jews rejecting Jesus, thought that they were superior. And they took pride in their place as God's Christian people. And therefore they thought that they had a right to heaven.

And Paul is showing here that for Jew and for Gentile, this rather complicated means of salvation is to show that the only people who are God's people are there through his mercy.

Jew and Gentile. So Paul says in verse 30 onwards, just as you were once disobedient to God, but have now received mercy because of their disobedience.

So they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. You see, we think it's sometimes hard for God to harden hearts.

How can he do that? But the reason he does it is to show that salvation is by his mercy. No one and none of us is good enough.

[26 : 47] All of us fail. All of us fail often. But it is only by the mercy of God that we are included into his people.

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience, Paul says in verse 32, so that he may be merciful to all. That is this rather complicated means of saving people is God's way of showing us what God is really like.

He is a God of mercy. And if he didn't harden hearts, and if he left this world perfect from the very beginning, though it may stay perfect and we enjoy the presence of God, we would not know the heart of God.

A heart of mercy. And that's why he does it as he does. The gospel of mercy is both a constant comfort and a challenge to us.

A comfort because it all relies on mercy expressed in Jesus' death and therefore does not rely on us. That's comforting. But it's also a challenge because we're so often tempted to pride and think that somehow we have a right to be part of God's people.

[28 : 00] But we don't. We are in by mercy and mercy alone. The gospel you see is humbling. Brings us to our knees.

Yes, it lifts up the lowly, but brings down the proud in their conceit. And it drives us to our knees so that it may lift us in praise.

I remember many years ago when I was much fitter than I am now, climbing Mount Bogong, the highest mountain in Victoria. And as we came towards the summit, we were breathless from the climb.

But as we got to the top, not only were we still breathless and panting from walking up this mountain, but we became sort of speechless as we had a 360 degree view on a beautifully clear day with blue sky at the wonderful scenery of the Victorian high country.

We were sort of blown away by the vastness of what we could see, having climbed up through the valleys and under the trees and so on. In a sense, Paul has now scaled the heights of the gospel in these 11 chapters of Romans.

[29 : 13] He's taken us into the rarefied air of the mystery of God and the heart of God. He's now got before him this vast vista of eternal plans and purposes of God from the beginning of creation to its very end and how God is working and why.

And it's as though he is breathless and almost speechless as he sees this vast scope of God's purpose.

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 to receive a gift in return. None of us is owed anything by God is what Paul is saying.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

[30 : 22] Paul is scanning this vast universe of the mercy of God. It is mercy that is not compromised by anybody being owed anything by God.

Salvation is from mercy at the beginning to mercy at the end. From grace to grace. Through faith for faith. And these 11 chapters have brought us to the pinnacle of the gospel of God.

And Paul is breathless with delight as he sees this extraordinary plan of God for the ages. God alone is to be exalted.

For all things come from and through and for him. All glory belongs to him. And our response like his must be a response of praise.

That the mercy of God is so deep and so high and so vast. Not a response of praise by word alone. But as we'll see in the opening verses of the next chapter next week.

[31 : 29] A response of offering our whole lives as a living sacrifice. Because of the mercies of God to us. But more of that next week.

Let's pray. Our God we thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel that demands us to respond with the obedience of faith. A gospel that brings us to our knees as we see your extraordinary and unmerited mercy to us.

The gospel of your righteousness. That you save unrighteous people like us without compromising your own righteousness.

A gospel of love. Love extended to us even though we are unlovely and your enemies. In the death of Jesus Christ.

[32 : 30] A gospel that reveals your wrath against sin. But a wrath that your son willingly takes on himself for us. As we scale this vast panorama of the gospel.

As we've seen it expounded over these 11 chapters of Romans. We stand almost speechless like St. Paul. At the heights of this glorious gospel.

And offer you alone our praise and our glory. And our lives. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.