

The Mystery!

Romans 11:25-36

October 3rd, 2010

When I was being interviewed by the pulpit committee of Owen's Chapel Baptist Church, I was 20 years of age. It was the first time I had ever talked to the committee, and they asked me various things. What would I do if I became pastor of the church, or was there anything they were doing now that I would do differently? I had this thought and shared it with them. I said, "I think it would be neat if we reversed the order of Sunday school and preaching for a couple of Sundays, but not tell anyone." The people who show up for Sunday school would be in worship and the people who show up for worship only would have to go to Sunday school, or leave. My purpose in wanting to do that was to expose people who had never been to Sunday school to what it was all about. I never did that in my time at Owen's Chapel. The last Sunday I was there before I came to Hardin, the wife of our deacon said, "The only thing I was disappointed in you was that you never had Sunday school second."

Have you ever wondered the reason most churches put Sunday school first and worship after? Why do we always sing first and preach last? How would it be if we changed our services at Hardin and I preached first and sang last? If you have read ahead, you know that Paul teaches that good theology should lead to good singing. But I was reared in a small church where I would hear that good singing leads to good preaching. I heard the worship leader say many times to sing well, so that the preacher would preach better. The preacher would say that great singing would lead to great preaching. We will learn that is not exactly correct. Good worship doesn't lead to good preaching. Great singing does not lead to great preaching. According to Romans 11, it is the truth that should cause us to sing. It is the truth of God revealed in preaching and teaching that should

cause us to fall on our faces before God and truly worship Him. The Apostle Paul concludes his teaching in chapter 11 concerning the salvation of Israel. But when he concludes, it will not be about Israel. It will be all about Israel's God. To Him be glory forever, amen.

Scripture

"Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. 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"; "and this will be My covenant with them when I take away their sins." As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God 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. 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."

A Mystery

Whenever I see the word, mystery, I remember reading the Hardy Boys as a kid, or the Nancy Drew Mysteries. I remember watching Colombo, and

Matlock. A mystery was something that could be solved. It was knowable, but unknown at the time. But in order to solve the mystery, someone had to do extensive investigation. That is what Colombo and Matlock did. In the end, they solved the mystery. That is not the kind of mystery that Paul is talking about here.

As we have studied Romans 9, 10, and 11, I think we can agree that it has been confusing at times. At times, it goes against human logic. Now Paul is telling us that he doesn't want any to become conceited, or wise, in your own sight. He is saying that he doesn't want anyone to believe they can solve this on their own, and to understand this is a mystery. According to Paul, mystery was a truth that was previously unknown, that couldn't be known by human reasoning or philosophy. It could only be known by the revelation of God. In Ephesians 3, Paul speaks of how the Jews and Gentiles are coming together in one body. He calls it a mystery that was hidden from the Old Testament prophets, but had now been revealed to him and the apostles. In other words, you can read your Old Testament from cover to cover and never understand that through Christ's death on the cross, God would break down the middle wall of partition between two people groups, bring them together as one, and use them to evangelize the world. But it has been revealed in the New Testament.

Israel's Partial Hardening

Now though, Paul speaks of the mystery of how God would ultimately bring Israel to salvation. Remember, in order for Israel to come to salvation, God had to harden part of Israel. When God hardened the nation of Israel and the gospel was preached to them, they rejected it, then the apostles turned to the Gentiles and they would receive it. Paul is teaching that the gospel would have never come to the Jews, because they would have kept it to themselves if this "*partial hardening*" had not come upon them (though God was always saving a remnant of Israel).

- **Fullness of the Gentiles**

The question is how long will Israel be hardened? Is it permanent? Is God through with Israel? Absolutely not! This hardening is partial, "*until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*" Now there are a lot of different

opinions about the "*fullness of the Gentiles*", and all I can tell you is what I believe it means today. I may change my mind next week. This can mean that God will continue to harden Israel until the last Gentile gets saved. Therefore, fullness would mean the full number of Gentiles. That would fit. Or fullness is describing a time in the future. Now we have to remember that Paul isn't writing today, he is writing nearly two thousand years ago. At that time, the Church in its infancy, was totally Jewish. Then God caused the persecution to come upon the Jewish Church and the gospel began to spread outside of Jerusalem and was being rejected by the Jews. Then Gentiles began to receive the gospel, so both Jews and Gentiles came together to be the Church. That is why Paul explained to the Ephesian Church that they are not two separate churches, but one tree, one body, one family, the middle wall broken down. So fullness of the Gentiles can mean Paul envisioned in the future that there would be a time when the Church would predominantly be made up of Gentiles because of this partial hardening among Israel. That is the one I would go with because previously in this chapter, Paul has been talking about how God's ultimate desire wasn't to save us as Gentiles, but to save Israel by making them jealous so they would come back to God. Therefore, it makes sense to me that the "*fullness of the Gentiles*" is when the Church explodes with Gentile growth and Israel sees what God is doing in the life of the predominantly Gentile Church, and that will ultimately lead to Israel being saved.

Israel will be Saved

But Paul says something next that is just hard to figure out. After he explains that this mystery is the partial hardening of Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles comes, he said, "*And in this way all Israel will be saved...*" Honestly, I have not read any scholar, pastor, or Jewish person who believes this is a promise that one day every Jew who has ever been born is going to be saved. Neither have I read anyone who believes that every single Jew living at that certain time would be saved. Everyone seems to believe that Paul is referring that in contrast to very few being saved right now, there is a day coming in the distant future when the Gentiles accomplished their purpose and aroused jealousy in the nation of Israel, and as a whole, Israel comes to faith in the Messiah. That would lead us to

believe that sometime before the Second Coming of Christ, there will be a national turning of the Jew back to God through Christ. Let's not be dogmatic or divide over this, but Paul told us in the beginning of Romans that not all of Israel is Israel. It tore a lot of us up, but God made the distinction between true Israel and regular Israel by the fact that God had sovereignly called true Israel to be true Israel. God has the right to be merciful to who He wants to be merciful, and to harden who He wants to harden. I lean toward this being a statement that says you never have to worry about Jews being saved because God is going to save every Jew that He promised to save, and He will use you and me to accomplish it. Therefore, there should never be an anti-semitic word or feeling in the Church about the nation of Israel. The very fact that they rejected Jesus and delivered Him to Pilate to be crucified on the cross was in the sovereign plan of God to bring us to faith so an atonement could be made that would deal with our sin and the sin of the Jew, once and for all.

- **Enemies Regarding the Gospel**

Then Paul quotes the Old Testament and puts together about four Scriptures. Now to be honest, as a pastor I have trouble reconciling divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I struggle with God being sovereign and all things going according to His plan, and me still making a real, meaningful choice. It just doesn't make sense. It seems as if one is true, then the other can't be true. This next verse is one of those same kind of tensions for me. He is talking about Israel when he said that regarding the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. When it comes to the gospel and having a crucified Messiah, the Jews are the enemy of God! They have rejected salvation that way, and it was for your sake. Do you understand what that means? For you to be saved, Israel became the enemy of God! They rejected the gospel so that it would come to you.

- **Beloved Regarding Election**

He goes on to say that regarding election, they are beloved for the sake of the forefathers. Whoa...Israel is the enemy of God concerning the gospel, but regarding election, they are still beloved; still loved by God. The reason is because God make a promise to Abraham. When God gives His word

about something, His word, His gift, His calling is irrevocable, it is not changeable. God will not change His mind or second guess Himself. You can trust that even though Israel has abandoned God, God has never abandoned Israel! Deuteronomy 7:6-9 clearly teaches that God didn't choose Israel because there was any goodness in them. If God didn't choose a people based on their goodness, then can't He handle their badness? Philosophically, we want to believe God chooses people based on their goodness, and rejects them based on their badness, so all you have to do to get in with God is just be good. While that sounds good to us, it sickens God. When you understand the depravity of man, you should understand that we all deserve justice. There is none good, no not one. There is none righteous, no not one. There is not one that seeks God, no not one. Because God didn't choose Israel based on her goodness, when Israel became bad, so to speak, God didn't reject Israel. Please get this picture; God has not rejected Israel; Israel has rejected God! In her rejection of God, He has used that rejection by hardening her to bring salvation to us. But by bringing salvation to us, it ultimately brings salvation back to Israel! We were once disobedient, and we received mercy. We received mercy because Israel was disobedient, and the gospel came to us. In the gospel coming to us, it arouses jealousy in Israel. So if God could take Gentiles who were disobedient and be merciful to them, can't He also take Jews who were disobedient and be merciful to them? Of course He can!

Just to show that we are all equal at the cross, God consigned all to disobedience so that He could have mercy on all. He is not just a Jewish God, He is the God of the whole world. Because we now know this mystery, we are supposed to break out in song. You see, in the Church, we've been taught that good preaching leads to an invitation where the lost get saved, and the backslider gets right. A lot of folks struggled with me when I came to Hardin because I wasn't a hellfire and brimstone preacher. A lot still struggle with me because we don't give an invitation every Sunday. You can't find any of that stuff in the Bible. It is something that got handed down to us by man. If you want to get down to the word of God, what needs to happen when we've heard the truth is the truth should cause us to look away from ourselves and to Him.

The Ways of God

Paul begins verse 33 with, "Oh." Do you hear Paul? He just talked about the great mystery of God in salvation and His plan to save the whole world, Jew and Gentile alike, and he says, "Oh"; in other words, *wow*, "the depth of the riches, and the wisdom, and the knowledge of God!" Have any of you ever peaked over the Grand Canyon? It is something! You just cannot imagine it, though my wife wouldn't even get close enough to peak over! Can you imagine the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God? It is almost scary. Our first instinct to the riches, wisdom, and knowledge of God is not going to be to dive in; it will be to run because it isn't something that we are familiar with. When we aren't familiar with something, we aren't comfortable. When we aren't comfortable, we normally want to shrink back from. So many people have never investigated Romans 9, 10, and 11 because it reveals the depth and the riches of the knowledge and wisdom of God. This is going to make some people mad, but God's wisdom means that He directs all things toward the end because in the depth of His knowledge, He knows how it will end. It's not because He knows what we are going to do, but because He ordained the end when He ordained the beginning. Because He knows the end, He knows how to direct it toward the end. He knew how to bring Israel to full and final salvation, and it was to save us. The fullness of the Gentile is going to bring about the fullness of the Jew in her relationship with Jesus. In that fullness, we will share in the blessing of the promises made to father Abraham because that was God's plan from the beginning.

Look at this next statement, "*How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!*" This word, "*inscrutable*", means 'to not be able to trace.' I get tickled at people who think they can figure God out. I get tickled at people who believe what we teach is a contradiction, when it isn't. Just because it cannot pass the test of human logic doesn't mean it is a contradiction when you are dealing with God. God said in Isaiah 55 that My ways are not your ways, and My thoughts are not your thoughts. By the way, God said as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts. How dare you try to confine God to a philosophical box! No, Paul himself, who taught Romans

9, 10, and 11, said, "*How unsearchable are His judgments!*" In other words, you will never be able to figure out what God did and why He did it! When you look at His ways, you will not see a footprint or a handprint, but you had better believe it is of Him.

Then Paul gets quite frank, "*For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?*" He said, did God ever borrow anything, therefore, He must repay man? Do you get what Paul is saying here? You cannot know everything God is doing, but you had better not question why He is doing it. I find it amazing that most of us believe that worship should come about when we know more about God. Paul is telling us to bow and worship Him because you don't know Him...wow!

All Things are for God

Verse 36 says, "*For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.*" This sounds similar to Colossians 1:16-17. When Paul is describing Jesus as Creator, he said that "all things are by Him, through Him, and for Him." We can agree that when God created, He is the originator and without Him there would be nothing. Without Him things would not continue because God sustains His creation. Ultimately, God is bringing creation to its ended conclusion. The same thing is said here, except not about creation; it is about redemption. Redemption of Jews and Gentiles is from God, through God, and for God. The God who receives glory in creation is the same God who receives glory in salvation. If you think creation is something, contemplate redemption. It is one thing for God to take nothing and make something good, but it is another thing for God to take something bad and remake it into something like the image of His Son Jesus.

Just to show the majesty of God, I ran across this information about the universe: The sun measures 865000 miles in diameter. Now, let's use a ball that measures two feet in diameter and place it in a large area. If our stride is two feet in length, we would have to walk 83 steps to reach Mercury, and in our scale model, we would place a mustard seed. If we walked 60 steps farther, we would come to Venus and place a BB. We turn and walk 78 steps more and come to the Earth and place a green pea. We turn and walk 108 more steps and come to Mars and place the head of a

pin. After Mars, we would sprinkle dust to represent the asteroid belt. From Mars, we walk 788 more steps and come to Jupiter and place an orange. From Jupiter, we walk 904 more steps and come to Saturn and place a golf ball. To get to Uranus, we would have to take 2022 steps and place a marble. We would take 2322 steps more to get to Neptune and place a cherry. Pluto has been declassified, but we would have to walk 2 ½ miles, and then it is 5 ½ miles back to the sun from there. Now, to get to the *next* sun, it is 7600 miles, and that is just the first of millions of billions! And we believe He holds the whole universe in the palm of His hand! From Him, by Him, through Him, for Him are all things in creation, including you!

Your salvation did not originate in you. It is not sustained by you. It is not for you! What are "all things" in Romans 9, 10, and 11? It's those whom He has redeemed. He didn't redeem you for you, He redeemed you for Him, and "*To Him be glory forever.*" You think that this makes God sound selfish, and yes, it absolutely does. He must be selfish, He must be self-centered. If God wasn't self-centered, then He would share His glory with another. If God shared His glory with another, people would be drawn to that other. People would not find salvation in that other, therefore, God must arrange all things around Himself because He is the ultimate One. Only when a person comes to Jesus can they come to God. When they come to God, they come to the sufficient One and they are made right. Once they are made right, God sustains them by the Spirit within Him; He doesn't leave a believer on his own. He ultimately brings him to his full and final salvation. When we think about this, to God alone be glory!

The last word in the chapter is the word, "*Amen.*" It means 'let it be so.' Paul is saying to the recipients of this letter, when you hear everything that he has taught us through the first 11 chapters of Romans, there ought to be a big AMEN in the congregation; let it be so!