

The Mystery of Salvation - Part One

Scripture Text: Romans 11:25-32

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago when we looked at the previous passage in this chapter, we read about the kindness and severity of God. We also saw how both the Jewish and non-Jewish people were branches in the root of the Abrahamic covenant. Today, we look at another concept of God's dealings with mankind — the mystery of salvation. This is a concept that has helped me better understand (I hope!) this thing that God does for us — save us from ourselves. How God relates to us is by some measure a mystery. What is a mystery? What makes something a mystery? Paul uses the word *mystery* twenty times in his letters. It is something that was or is for a period of time hidden or not known. It often requires God's revelation to make it known to us.

We will explore a little deeper into the mystery of salvation in general and God's dealing with mankind later, but for today, we will look specifically at the mystery of salvation as it relates to Jews and Gentiles. There is no doubt that the Jewish people are a unique people. Some may say, though, "What is mysterious about the way God relates to them?" God has an interesting way of dealing with His people throughout time. We know that God wants Israel to be in a right relationship with Him, otherwise He would not extend His hand to them all day long (Romans 10:29). Israel's long, turbulent history is proof that God loves them and pursues them, even when they turn from Him.

Israel's Rejection Means Gentile Acceptance

A secret or mystery was about Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ and non-Jewish people acceptance of the Son of God. Israel's rejection meant Gentiles would be saved, or as we read earlier in the chapter, grafted into the root. Look at the following verse.

Romans 11:25 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.*

We see a few of things from this one verse. For instance, we should not be wise in our own sight. We ought to be humble when it comes to what God chooses to reveal to us. May we never say we have it all figured out. We have to be careful that we let God speak and not us. There are a few things, maybe many things, in Scripture that are difficult to understand. The Trinity is one. Another is the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. There are a few things that God has chosen to not *fully* reveal to us right now. It is not that they are unknowable, but that God has chosen to not reveal everything yet. We must be humble and admit that we do not have all the answers. Only God knows fully His plan and His work in all of creation. Paul wanted his readers to know about a particular mystery.

In this passage, the mystery referred to God's saving activity toward Gentiles as a result of Israel's rejection of the gospel. Paul wrote that there was a partial hardening of Israel until the time when all of the Gentiles who will accept Jesus are brought into the family of God. This is a positive thing. The gospel was spreading and people were receiving it. However, Paul wanted the Gentiles to understand this mystery of Israel's hardening and the Gentiles' receiving the gospel so they would not become conceited and think too highly of themselves. Most Jewish people had rejected Christ and had become resistant to God's saving grace through the gospel. However, this hardening of Israel was limited in scope and in time. It was "in part" in that some (the believing remnant) had not become callous toward God. Some Jews have in fact accepted Jesus Christ. It was also "until" the full number of Gentile believers had come to Christ — that is, the hardening was temporary. Israel, for the most part, would not remain resistant to the gospel forever. God was going to do a new work in which He will save all Israel.

All Israel Will Be Saved in the Future

The mystery God revealed here is that He is not finished with Israel. We see three things that happen or will happen as it relates to this mystery: 1) A partial hardening had come on Israel, 2) this hardening would continue until the full number of Gentiles are saved, and 3) all of Israel will be saved at some point. Look at the following verses.

Romans 11:26-29 ²⁶ *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";* ²⁷ *"and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."* ²⁸ *As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.* ²⁹ *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*

One thing we know is there is a future for Israel *if* it does not persist in unbelief (Romans 11:23). The statement "all Israel will be saved" may be a bit confusing. Some think this means "spiritual Israel," that is, all believers, Jew and Gentile alike. But throughout this entire section Paul has been comparing Gentile and Jew as separate groups. Some think it is about a mass conversion of Jews, or that it means the salvation of the "remnant" of Israel. We know not all of Israel is truly Israel. Not all who are Abraham's descendants are recipients of God's promise to Abraham, just as not all who say "Lord, Lord" are truly followers of Christ. Paul has already mentioned this back in chapter nine.

Romans 9:6-7 ⁶ *But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,* ⁷ *and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."*

Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah later in the same chapter when he wrote, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved..." (Romans 9:27) We know from these passages that not every blood relative who descended from Abraham will be saved. But, it does not appear that Paul is referring to the remnant when he mentioned that all of Israel will be saved. Whatever is meant by "all Israel will be saved," we know that it involves placing trust in Jesus Christ.

Israel's salvation would be on the same basis as anyone else's, that is, by responding in faith to the forgiveness made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus was clear when He told Nicodemus, a Jewish Pharisee, about what is necessary in order for someone to enter into the kingdom of God.

John 3:3³ *Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Jesus was speaking to Jewish people when He said that. Being born a Jewish person, into the lineage of Abraham, was not enough. Everyone, Jew and Gentile, must be born again. Everyone must repent of sin and turn to Jesus Christ to be saved. So when Paul wrote that all of Israel will be saved, we should understand this as all Jewish people who truly turn to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They must still be born again in faith to Jesus Christ, like everyone else. Paul was saying that beyond the period of Israel's unbelief, when the Gentiles were coming to faith, there would come a time when believing Jews would turn to Christ in faith. They would join the faithful remnant of Jewish people and believing Gentiles to complete the family of God, which stretches throughout history. This does not mean that every single Jew living will be saved.

Israel's failure to respond to the gospel made them an enemy of God. That worked for the advantage of the Gentiles. As we saw earlier in this chapter, because many Israelites rejected Christ, the Church took the gospel to the nations and many responded to it and were saved. Although unbelieving Jews were temporarily enemies with their God, God still loved them, after all, they were His chosen people. God had not gone back on His promises to Israel's forefathers — namely Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When God says He will do something, you can take it to the bank. Paul already mentioned at the beginning of chapter nine about Israel's special relationship with God in receiving the covenants, the Law of God, the temple worship, and the many promises throughout the Old Testament. God does not change His mind regarding the nation He called and sustained with gracious acts of provision and protection.

God Desires to Have Mercy on All

One of the great truths about God is that He is many things. He is holy. He is wrathful. He is just. He is patient. He is loving. Among all these things, God reveals Himself to be merciful. Even though we deserve punishment, God extends mercy to us. His mercy is shown throughout the history of Israel. Though the Israelites turned from their God and went after other "gods", their merciful and loving God pursued them. Even in their disobedience, God made a way for the Israelites to receive mercy. See below.

Romans 11:30–32³⁰ *For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience,*³¹ *so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.*³² *For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*

The mystery of Israel's salvation features God's great mercy. His mercy extends to those who do not deserve it. The Gentile believers were at one time in a state of rebellion, but now they had received mercy as a result of Israel's disobedience. In the same way, Israel's present disobedience opened the possibility of their receiving mercy as a result of God's present mercy to the Gentiles. God would grant mercy to Israel because He had shown mercy to the Gentiles. God had given Israel, and all of us for that matter, over to disobedience. Both Jews and Gentiles were so imprisoned in their disobedience that there was no way to escape except by God's mercy.

Romans 3:9–10 ⁹ *What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,* ¹⁰ *as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one;*

No one can claim to deserve the mercy of God because it is a free gift for all who believe regardless of a person's family background or how "good" a person is. The truth is, no one is safe from God's wrath, for all have been consigned to disobedience. Because all have sinned and turned from God, all deserve God's wrath. In fact, we are all storing up God's wrath by our disobedience (Romans 2:5). If that were the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey once put it, we would be in a terrible predicament. I think the key verse to understanding this passage is verse thirty-two: *God wants to have mercy on all*. Just as all have sinned, God desires to have mercy on all. God saved the Gentiles when one would expect only the Jews to be saved, but in the future he will amaze all by his grace again by saving the Jews. This should make it be clear that everyone's salvation is by mercy alone. The bottom line is that God desires to "have mercy on all" (both Jews and Gentiles). Mercy is His heart and it is who He is.

Conclusion

How should we respond to this passage? Does God have to fit in a box for you to understand Him? Are you content with God's dealings with us being somewhat of a mystery? Are you one of those who has to have it all figured out? There is a mystery to God, things that we might not understand, and that is OK. The important thing is this: Do you trust Him? Do you trust God to be God and to know what is best? How do you treat Jewish people? God loves them. Do you?

When it comes to God's dealing with mankind, there are several important truths to remember. We all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. We all deserve eternal separation from God. We will all get eternal separation from God if God does not intervene in our lives. If it were not for God's mercy, no one would be saved, but thanks be to God that at the right time, when we were enemies of Him, He sent His only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. God desires mercy on all. That is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!