

Chapter 55

To God Be the Glory

(Romans 11:28–36)

‘Israel’ in verse 26a means the nation as a whole. Spiritual awakening will come to the nation of Israel as a part of the reaching of the world for the Lord Jesus Christ, **after** a time when many gentile nations have been reached. Jesus will rescue Israel from the heavenly Zion. ‘Zion’ is the heavenly Zion (as in Hebrews 12:22), the location of Jesus’ heavenly ministry. Jesus will bring the covenant with Abraham to new heights.

Is the land of Israel involved in this? The promises made to Abraham certainly involved land. From what Paul has said in Romans 4:13 and 8:18–25 it seems Paul would say, ‘Yes, land is involved – but not just yet! The land will come to all of God’s Israel when they get to the new heavens and new earth in which dwells righteousness.’ Maybe they will get their land even before the final glory at the time when they come to faith (as Luke 21:24 seems to say).

Verses 28 to 29 show how this fits in with God’s plan. ²⁸*As regards the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but as regards God’s election, they are beloved for the sake of the fathers,* ²⁹*for the gifts and the calling of God are without regret.*

God treats Israel as enemies, because he has plans to bless the gentiles while delaying Israelite blessing. His sending out the gospel to gentiles has involved his treating Israelites as enemies, and leaving them for a while in their sins. But on the other hand,

he still has the nation of Israel in mind. Despite their rebelliousness towards God, there is still such a thing as the national 'election' of Israel. God has chosen them as a unique nation to be used by him. No other earthly nation will be used in precisely the same way. In this respect God still loves them. As regards God's election, they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. God still is viewing them with love. He does so out of faithfulness to the promises that he had given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Paul adds a further word of explanation: ' . . . for the gifts and the calling of God are without regret' (11:29). The reason why God does not give up on Israel is because he never abandons his gifts and calling. He does not change his mind about what he plans. He cannot afterwards feel sorry about what he has done, because he gave an oath to Abraham. An oath is never subject to change or alteration.

Now he describes again exactly what has happened (11:30–31) and then explains it further in a great sweeping principle (11:32). ³⁰*For as you once were disobedient to God but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience,* ³¹*so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they may also now be shown mercy.* The gentiles were once disobedient, before the time of the coming of Jesus, when they were in wickedness and darkness. But thousands of them had in Paul's time come to salvation. Jewish disobedience speeded up the process of the gospel going to gentiles. But exactly the same three things will be true on the Jewish side also. Israel are now (in Paul's time and still today) disobedient; this exactly corresponds to the way gentiles were disobedient before the time of the coming of Jesus. Jews will one day receive mercy; hundreds of thousands of them, perhaps millions, will one day come to salvation. Again it is parallel to what had happened to gentiles earlier. Jews will receive mercy because of the salvation that has come to the gentiles ('because of the mercy shown to you'). They will be saved by a good kind of 'jealousy'.

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Paul next brings the entire argument of Romans 11:1–32 to a conclusion in a sweeping principle: ³²*For God shut up all people into disobedience in order that he might have mercy upon all.*

God has a habit of working in such a way that it demonstrates the universal sinfulness of the human race. God leaves a people for a while, and when God leaves them their own internal sinfulness shows itself in unbelief and disobedience. Then God intervenes and has mercy. Then God does the same thing with another people. He leaves them for a while, and they also prove their own sinfulness. Then they also receive mercy. So he handles the gentiles and then the Jews. God controls the way in which the entire world manifests its sinfulness. He demonstrates that all have sinned; he demonstrates that it is only his sovereign mercy that ever brings salvation to any people. Jesus' kingdom has not yet come to its full manifestation and glory, but it has begun! Outpourings of the Spirit will take place in unexpected places. Despised people will be reached.

It is necessary to take a balanced position with regard to Israel. Some have a quite heretical adulation of Israel and talk as if Jewish nationality gave an automatic advantage in being saved. This is a mistake. The opposite extreme is to treat Israel as if the nation is no different from any other nation. But this contradicts Romans 11. Others tend to have a strong contrast between the Mosaic law and grace – quite rightly in my opinion. But they also make a very sharp distinction between Israel and the church and talk of them as entirely separate – as if God has two purposes which are unrelated to each other. Some make predictions about Israel that are proved wrong after a few years. The Bible has a balanced position. On the one hand there is only one way of salvation. On the other hand there is Romans 11! The most significant thing is that the people of Israel still exist and God has plans to bring Israel into his one-and-only saved people.

Paul is amazed and full of praise. Romans 11:33–36 is a psalm. It has three sections to it, and each of the three sections itself has three parts.

1. He admires God’s sending salvation to the world.

*³³O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgements
and how unfathomable his ways!*

‘Riches’ refers to God’s abundant grace and mercy. ‘Wisdom’ is God’s skill at achieving what is good and right; and Paul mentions God’s knowledge. He is fully informed of all that happens in history and in everything else. The second line expresses Paul’s wonder at the judgements of God – his decisions about how he wishes to do things! After we have followed Paul’s teaching in Romans 1–11, and especially in Romans 9–11, we ought to have the feeling that the ways of God are entirely beyond us! Then the third line mentions God’s ‘ways’, his methods and habits, the things he often does and likes to do. They are so deep and mysterious, past finding out.

2. He explains why he speaks so movingly of the depths of God’s wisdom and knowledge.

*³⁴For who has known the mind of the Lord?
And who has been his counsellor?
³⁵Or who has given to God so that he might be repaid?*

God’s wise plans to bring salvation to the world are utterly incomprehensible. It is impossible to be God’s advisor. What qualifications do we have to tell God what he ought to do? Who could ever be God’s advisor? We cannot get God into a position where he is indebted to us.

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3. All things are for God's glory.

³⁶For from him, and through him, and for him are all things . . .

God is the author and origin of everything: everything is 'from him'. God is the sustainer of everything: everything is 'through him'. God is the goal of everything: everything is 'for him'.

To him be the glory for ever. Amen.

Paul knows that when God has achieved his final will, the overflow of happiness to all of the people of God will last for ever and ever. Sin will be wiped out of God's universe. God will be all in all. God's rich treasures will be shared with his people, and 'to him' will be 'glory for ever'.