

Prayer

Lift us up, Lord Jesus, and make us unafraid of life because we trust in You! Give us faith that is confident to face and defeat the enemy, instil in us the courage to face danger without hesitation, and grant us the gift of hope that looks beyond trouble and stress to see the true opportunities You have given us. Open us up to find real life through You, Lord Jesus: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Paperwork

Paper remains a useful form of information storage. However, ask the Lord to help you deal with the information sent to you; what should be kept and what should be recycled.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about nuclear power and how it affects the world today*
- *Give thanks for the work of hospitals in poor regions of the world*
- *Pray for women who are marginalised within society*

Meditation

Peace is knowing that you are special and loved;
Loved so much that you do not have to question it.

Security is being able to do what you believe to be right,
And not feeling ashamed before anyone else about it.

Health is feeling good about yourself all the time,
So good that no illness or disease can break your heart.

Hope is having complete confidence in your future,
For it is guaranteed by promises of which you can be sure.

To act with integrity is to abandon deceit and wickedness,
And be entirely honest and open in your dealings with others.

Confidence is being able to get on with things unhindered,
For you know God's guidance and your conscience is clear.

Although all these things sound worldly, you will indeed find
That they are most true for us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Study - Romans 11:25-36

²⁵ So that you do not overrate your own judgements, friends, I want you to be fully aware of this mystery; part of Israel has become hardened until all the Gentiles have come in. ²⁶ In this way, all Israel will be saved, as it is written;

'A Deliverer will come from Zion;
He will remove the wickedness of Jacob.

²⁷ And this is my covenant with them,
When I remove their sins'

²⁸ Now according to the Gospel, they are enemies because of you; but according to the 'election' they are loved because of the forefathers, ²⁹ for the gifts of God cannot be revoked.

³⁰ Just as you were once disbelievers in God, but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ in the same way, they are now disobedient so that through the mercy shown to you, they might one day receive mercy; ³² God has entrapped all people in disobedience, so that He might show mercy to all!

³³ O how great is the wealth,
wisdom and knowledge of God!
We can never truly fathom

His judgements or his ways.

³⁴ Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been His counsellor?

³⁵ Or who has given Him a gift
and been repaid by Him?

³⁶ For everything that exists is from Him, and through Him, and to Him. To Him be the glory for ever! AMEN.

Thought for the day

Text

Romans 11:33

³³ O how great is the wealth, wisdom and knowledge of God! We can never truly fathom His judgements or his ways.

Thought

This verse is a wonderful expression of praise to God, and is worth learning so that it can feed the heart, soul, mind and spirit. Some believe that this was part of an early hymn of praise to God, and they have certainly inspired song writers of more recent generations.

Singing songs, psalms and hymns has long been important to Christians. The psalms contain the words of Scripture; songs express a heart of praise to God, and hymns reflect the many deep truths of our relationship with God. Through them all, God inspires us to righteousness and holiness.

Review

Paul's argument about what will happen to the Jewish people comes to its conclusion here at the end of chapter 11 of Romans, and despite three chapters of agonising over the issue and many discussions about why the Jews rejected their Messiah, he says that the solution is a 'mystery' (11:25)! God's recall of the Jewish people into the fold of his 'elect' will not be something we can reason or explain. However, Paul concludes that Christ has split the people of Israel between those who reject Him and those who accept Him, and that in His own way, God will act to save 'all Israel' (11:26) when 'all the Gentiles have come in', despite their having being 'hardened' since the before time of Christ.

This all sounds amazing, but alongside our interest in the future of the Jews, there is another major issue at stake here. It seems that this scripture says God will save everyone in the end! This is one interpretation of verses 25 and 26 which say, '... until all the Gentiles have come in', and 'In this way, all Israel will be saved ...'. Then in verse 32, we read, 'God has entrapped all people in disobedience, so that He might show mercy to all!' Lastly, the doxology (meaning 'words of praise') in the last verse tells us that all things come from God and will return to Him. Together, these verses suggest that God will mercifully save all people and everything, yet such a conclusion forces us to ask what the death of Jesus means if God will save everyone in the end!

However, the impression that everyone will be saved at the end is only this, and the idea is called Universalism, and it is a popular belief amongst many including some who would call themselves Christians. The idea is particularly attractive to those who believe that loved ones who have died and lived 'good' lives (whether or not they have denied God or been to church) will still have a place in heaven when they die. The argument goes that God will surely not reject 'good' people, come what may. Those who hold this belief will often quote this passage of Scripture as evidence of God's Universal love and salvation.

However, this doctrine is false, and does not fit with the rest of Scripture. In addition, if we read this passage carefully and check out the meaning of the words used by Paul, then we will discover that he does not advocate Universalism at all. The expression 'all Israel' (11:26) means 'Israel' in general, and certainly not all individual Jews, for example, and the Greek expression used in the previous verse (11:25) to refer to the gathering of 'all the Gentiles' is a little peculiar and cannot possibly mean 'all people' (we will look at the details of this later). Also, the great statement of Paul in verse 32 that God intends to show His mercy to all people is completely true, but despite being shown this mercy, nothing is said here about how many people will eventually be ready to accept God's love at the last. The history of the world shows us that some will say 'no thanks', and this text does not offer a hope of reprieve for those who walk their own way.

Paul says here that by the mystery revealed to him, he believes that God will give the Jews another chance to come back into His eternal plan. Up to now we have not known exactly when this will be, but now, he gives us the clear impression that all this will happen at the end of time, at the last harvest, when God will bring everything to its final conclusion. This is the only conclusion we can draw from verse 25 and the

discussion of the mercy of God in verses 30 to 32. All this will only be completed when the great mysteries of God are revealed at the end of time, and our understanding of everything will be complete. Yes, everything will find its completion in Christ (11:36), but that is not to say that everyone will be saved!

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The revelation of the mystery
- Election and mercy
- The majesty and glory of God

Going Deeper

We will now look firstly at what Paul says about the revelation of the mystery of God for Israel, using Biblical quotes (11:25-27. Then, we will see how he explains this in terms of God's 'election' and His 'mercy' in the face of people's disobedience (11:28-32). Finally, we will rejoice with Paul at the majesty and glory of God who does everything for a purpose (11:33-36).

The revelation of the mystery

It is quite clear that Paul does not want the Gentile people who have become Christians to think they have any superior role in God's eyes just because the Jewish people have, as a whole, rejected the Gospel. There is a divine mystery at work, of which we should all stand in awe (11:25). In a number of places in his writings, Paul talks of 'mysteries' (1 Cor 15:51, 1 Cor 2:1-7, Col 1:26,27 etc.) and at each point he is careful to caution his readers about the majesty of God and His authority in handling the world according to His own will and plan. Paul will argue to excessive lengths about most matters, but he seems to have an ability also to stop, and recognise that some things are lost in the mind of God; sometimes He reveals His mysterious will, and sometime He does not, and where He does, we have a duty to accept it into our understanding of the divine plan. That is clearly the message here.

Paul has already made the case which says that the hearts of the Jews have become hardened (11:7f.), but the divine mystery is that this is only true until the time comes when 'all the Gentiles have come in'. A word for word translation of the Greek at this point would read something like this 'until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in'. This is almost impossible to understand literally, but it is best thought of as meaning that a time will come when God will decide that all nations have had sufficient opportunity to hear the Gospel. This is very similar to what Paul and other New Testament writers say about the end times, when the Good news will be preached to all people before Christ comes in glory (e.g. Luke 21:24).

As he does in a number of places in Romans, Paul then puts together a whole series of Biblical quotes in verses 26 and 27; from Isaiah 59:20 'And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the LORD.' Also from Isaiah 59:21 'And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD ...' and from the Septuagint version of Isaiah 27:9 'and this is my blessing of him (Jacob), when I take away his sins'. The purpose of this bringing together of texts is to impress upon the Gentile church that God has said in the Old Testament that He will deal with His people 'from Zion' and take away their sins, but Paul cannot tell us how. These texts are for him the heart of the mystery. For a Gentile, they have a Saviour who has come in Jesus who has removed their sins through faith. So much has already been explained by Paul already in Romans, but how God will go about doing this for the hardened Jews, we do not know, because it is in the future.

Election and mercy

The argument Paul presents in verses 28 to 32 are difficult for us because we do not have the Jewish background from which Paul speaks. In his day, it was the belief of many people that even though many Jewish people were clearly bad and some were good, there was a sufficient 'store' of God's merit and favour vested in their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to account for the salvation of all the Jews who were their descendants. Paul appears to refer to this in verse 28 where he speaks of the Jews as loved 'because of the forefathers', and he says that the 'gifts of God cannot be revoked' (11:29). This is as much reason as Paul can give for the mystery of God's intent to save 'all Israel' at the end.

In the meantime, he is concerned to press upon his Gentile readers in Rome, the fact that God treats all people fairly. His example is not straightforward, however! Speaking to the Gentiles, he says that they were once 'disbelievers' (11:29) who have received mercy. He then goes on to make the rather circular argument that in fairness, now the Jewish people have become disobedient (and therefore disbelievers) by rejected their Messiah, should they not also receive mercy (11:31)? The conclusion is rather extraordinary. Everyone, Jew or Gentile, has been disobedient, so that God 'might show mercy to all!'

The impression of God's universal mercy is given, but again, it is not Paul's intent to say that God will save people who have been disobedient to Him and do not have faith in Christ, as some suggest. Paul has already explained that God's mercy works through the death of Jesus, and whoever is saved can only be saved through Him (3:22f.). It is still a mystery how this mercy works, and also a mystery how God will restore the Jews, and this is clearly consistent with the Old Testament and the Gospel, but not the idea that God will universally accept all!

The majesty and glory of God

Paul had now completed all he can say about the Jewish people and the Gospel. This passage of his letter began with a sense of uncertainty and angst about the whole question of whether God would be able to be faithful to a people who had rejected their Messiah (9:1f.). At the end of this section however, Paul was filled with praise at the idea that God had provided an answer to his personal dilemma! We can suggest that he may well have received the revelation of God about the treatment of the Jews at the end times whilst writing the letter, for he certainly did not appear confident of it when he first raised the subject! This is quite possible, for the process of dictating and writing was lengthy and laborious, and there was ample time for Paul to think and pray through what he was saying as the scribe who copied his words was working.

The words of praise used by Paul (11:34,35) echo Isaiah 40:13 'Who has directed the spirit of the LORD, or as his counsellor has instructed him?' and also Jeremiah 23:18: 'For who has stood in the council of the LORD so as to see and to hear his word?'. Both these quotes remind us of the judgement court of Almighty God in which judgement is given and also mercy shown. This makes it clear to us that Paul had in mind the end times when God would give His final judgements and (according to the book of the Revelation of John) deal with both those who had accepted Jesus, and also those who rejected Him, but also make a new offer of mercy to the Jewish people.

These verses also contain an echo of Job 35:7 'If you are righteous, what do you give to him; or what does he receive from your hand?' This is perhaps understandable, for surprisingly, the last quarter of the book of Job is one of the longest and most sustained poems of praise to Almighty God in the whole of the Old Testament (contained largely in the speech of Elihu). These words make it obvious that there is no 'bribing' of God! The Jewish people are not His favorites because they have bribed Him in any way, for there is no gift that can be given that will affect the judgments He makes. Everything is in His hands (11:36).

Application

It is very important to be careful about the issue of universalism, for even some of the most distinguished of scholars say that this passage suggests the universal and merciful acceptance of all people by God without regard to their disobedience or sin. However, this position is so completely at odds with Paul's impassioned explanation of the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection earlier in the letter, it is impossible to agree with it. Paul is insistent throughout his writing upon salvation by faith through Christ alone, so this letter cannot possibly suggest otherwise. Those who pursue this line fail to account for the fact of humanity, which is that some will always reject what is offered, for that is the nature of humanity and of sin, and they fail to account for Paul's concentration on God's ultimate mercy to the Jewish people at the end of time, in fulfilment of His Covenant love. There is no way that we can try to weave a doctrine of universalism into mainstream Christianity; it is not there, and never will be.

The other theme running through the latter verses of this chapter is that the Gentile Christians should have regard for the Jewish people even though they have rejected the Messiah. Paul suggests there is an onus on the Christian community to reach out to Jewish people regardless of their rejection of Jesus, in a spirit of generosity and godly love. The Jews are His people; estranged from God in Christ, although not from their point of view. Indeed, while the church is at this time lost in its attempts to find its identity in a so-called 'post-modern' world, it may benefit the Christian church if they were to attempt to come closer to their own roots through association with Jewish people rather than compromise with the spirits of the age!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you come across 'universalism' within the church? In what form? Discuss how significant this is in the life of God's people generally.
2. To what extent can we share our faith with Jewish people? Do you know where to find the Jewish communities near where you live?
3. If you read the last four verses of this text, how much of this praise is like or unlike the praises we give Him today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There is in this passage a feeling that God is great and that we are very small. Sometimes Scriptures make us feel like this! We can be inspired by the Bible, and also overwhelmed by it, and in this passage, the amazing power and authority of God to do what He so desires is expressed strongly. I find myself challenged to do my best to understand more about modern Judaism; there is much to be found on the internet, but there is no substitute for talking about things with people rather than using the internet.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you known moments when you have been bursting with praise to Almighty God? Paul dealt with this by quoting Scriptures (see verses 34,35). How do you react when the Spirit of God comes on you to praise God?*
- *Think carefully about how Paul resolves the issue of the eventual fate of the Jewish people. Are you comfortable with this? Pray about the issue and also ask the Lord to help you learn more about this complex issue.*

Final Prayer

Lead me, Lord Jesus, through the days ahead. When I do not know what to do, guide me by a word; when I do not know where to go, guide me by your hand; when I do not know what to say, give me words to speak. Lead me, Lord Jesus, for You are my guide. AMEN
