

That he might have mercy on all

Romans 11:1-2, 29-36

A sermon for the Season of Pentecost

The first eight chapters of Paul's Letter to the Romans set out in logical form how salvation works. Then in Romans 9-11 he gives an example of how salvation works, a case study. Why have the Jewish people not followed their Messiah? Paul is also on his way to Spain through Rome (Romans 15:24). In Rome there are both Jewish and Gentile Christians, and he is writing to introduce himself to them. (The Letter to the Romans could also be called Paul's last will and testament.)

Paul starts out in Romans 9:1-5 saying: God's promises do not fail. His covenant with the Jews does not change. Then Paul asks the question: How is it possible the Jews did not believe? He uses famous illustrations. The first one is about election through Isaac and Jacob. Paul quotes Malachi 1:2-3 it says: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I have hated" (Romans 9:13). That word "hated" really is there. The second one is about the plagues in Egypt where God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Romans 9:17-18).

In Romans 9:19-23 Paul also uses an illustration from both Isaiah (64:8) and Jeremiah (18:6). Remember we are like the clay; God is like the potter. The clay does not say to the potter: "Hey, you are not doing it right. You should do it otherwise." We like to think that we're calling the tune, but no way. The Lord is doing everything his way.

Romans 10 is also about salvation. Paul describes how God comes to us in the preaching of the Word. Paul says that in 10:8 and 10:17: Not by the law, not by good works, but God comes to us ". . . by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

In Romans 11:13-15 the Jews are like the root of the olive tree, the leaven for the dough. They are the starting point. We later are the wild olive that is grafted in. The fruit of the tame olive will be brought in just the fruit of the wild olive will be brought in.

Then Romans 11:29-32: "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable." What God says is so, and what God says he does. There is one covenant; there is one promise. They are his gift and he gave it to the Jewish people.

Nevertheless, the Jewish people sin. This is really the same as Paul wrote earlier in his letter to Rome. We recall Romans 3:9 where Paul writes: "What then? Are we Jews any better off?" Then follow nine verses (3:10-18) which are quotes from the Old Testament about how everyone is caught in sin.

Paul concludes: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:20-22). But finally in Romans 11:32 he writes: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all." That is to say once again: "All have sinned" (Romans 3:19-20), but then he writes: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifest apart from the law" (Romans 3:21), through Jesus Christ and his cross. That means that when Paul is asked about whether there are two ways of salvation or one, he is saying: There is one. (In Galatians 6:16 he calls the church the "Israel of God.") There are not two covenants, two ways of salvation; there is the one way: The grace of God and mercy in Jesus Christ.

After writing: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all," Paul continues:

"O the depths 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 for ever. Amen"

In a sense Paul lifts up his hands and proclaims this doxology and says "Amen."

We must be very careful that we do not misunderstand what Paul is doing. There are four ways to react to God consigning "all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Romans 11:32).

First: Someone has said: "That which is above me does not concern me. It has nothing to do with me." Sometimes we think that way: "Who knows? God is that X in the sky." We can just ignore that X and go our own way.

As G. K. Chesterton is famous for saying: "When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything."

Others will say: "We don't understand it; we can't do anything about it. We just have to grin and bear it. That's God's will." We just have to bear whatever God gives us. Of course that's not the Christian hope.

The second way that people react is the Epicurean way, which is to say: "Let's eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die." That is found already in Isaiah 22:13, seven hundred years before Christ. It is also found in 1 Cor 15:24: "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" Grab what you can. It's all relative, all meaningless. However, the Epicureans were not simply party-goers and drinkers. They knew if you drank too much, you had a big hangover. Or if you partied too much, everything would go out the window. Actually, they were pretty temperate.

The third way was also common then as now. We find it in people who say that God is whatever you want God to be, whatever suits you. As that famous Eighteenth Century thinker Voltaire said: "Man created God in his own image and God returned the compliment." As Heinrich Heine, the great German poet, said about 1850: "God has to forgive us because he's made that way." We make up God however we want him to be.

Fourth: That's not what Paul does in these four verses that conclude Romans 9-11. He describes who God is and how he works. What Paul does is comparable to Job and all his troubles and trials. In Job 38-42 Job and the Lord have a controversy, a debate. In Job 38:4 the Lord says: "Where were you when I created the foundation of the earth?" He goes on like that for three chapters: Who do you think you are? I am the Creator, and you are the creature. I'm infinite and you are finite. Who are you to think that you can tell me what I can do and must do!? (It's like the potter and the clay.) But that's not how the Book of Job ends. In Job 42:6 it ends by saying: "I thought I knew you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you, and I repent in dust and ashes."

Job's real problem is not that God is infinite and Job is finite, but his real problem was that he was trying to judge God. That is after all the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." And we like to say: "God, we'll tell you how to do it." We really put ourselves above him. That is how we then become ourselves the idol we worship.

Finally Paul writes: "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" Then he gives

two references to Isaiah that are like these quotes from the Book of Job and ends with the doxology: "To him be the glory for ever. Amen"

Our reason is broken and limited. Therefore we are not able to figure God out, but he is the one who reveals himself to us. He is both the hidden God because he is beyond all our thinking, beyond all analogy. He is also the revealed God. He is revealed in coming in Jesus Christ on the cross and rising from the dead.

With this passage in Romans 11:33-36 belongs also a section from 1 Corinthians 1 in which Paul is writing much in the same vein (1 Cor 1:18-21):

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power and wisdom of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."

Amen.