

Romans: A Glimpse Into the Decree

Romans 11:28-32

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 11. Today we come to the end of the argumentation of the first part of this great book. For eleven chapters Paul has been pressing an argument to us, making points about sin and judgment and atonement and justification and union with Christ and sanctification and the law and the work of the Holy Spirit and predestination and the place of Israel and more.

Today we come to the culminating point of those first eleven chapters of teaching, vital teaching of theology. These verses that we are going to look at today, verses 28 through 31 summarize Romans 9 through 11. You'll remember that in Romans 9 through 11 Paul has been concerned to speak with us about the place of Israel in God's plan. In three phrases here in verses 28 through 32, Paul is going to summarize the key points of his teaching about the place of Israel in God's plan. But he is going to do more. He's going to give us, actually he's going to provide for us, a God-given glimpse into the divine decree.

When we say that word, the *divine decree*, or that phrase, or those words, we mean the secret workings of God's providence in His plan for salvation. God does not often pull back the veil in the word of God and say, "Now I'm going to show you what's going on behind the scenes." Occasionally, however, He does that, as He does that at the beginning of Job in Job 1 and 2. Although, as far as we know, He never tells Job, He tells us and we're thankful for that, but Job went through those experiences not having the veil lifted for him. He was called upon to trust the Lord with all his heart and lean not on his own understanding. Occasionally in His word, God pulls the veil back and says, "Now this is what I'm doing and this is why I have done what I am doing." Paul is going to show us one of those passages right here in verses 28 through 32.

Now again, in chapters 9 through 11 of Romans, Paul has been explaining to us the continuing place of Israel in God's plan. He's speaking to a predominantly Gentile church. He's speaking to a predominantly Gentile church that knows that all around the Mediterranean world that most people in their time that are coming to the Lord Jesus Christ are Gentiles. They are very aware of the fact that though

all of the apostolic churches were planted out of synagogues, that already the Gentiles are coming more quickly to the Messiah than are the ancient people of Israel. They are wondering, "What are you doing Lord? What's going on? How is Israel going to factor into Your plan? Do they factor into Your plan? Do they factor into Your plan anymore?" In these verses, Paul will summarize and highlight for us that place of Israel through a series of parallels and contrast and paradoxes. So let's hear God's word in Romans chapter 11.

"From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience that he might show mercy to all." Amen.

Thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word, may He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Lord, open our eyes to see Your truth, to hear, to adore You, to worship You, to praise You, to give You the glory. But also to live in worship of You as well, trustingly, obediently leaning not on our own understanding. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

In summing up his teaching on the place of Israel, the continuing place of Israel in the plan of God, Paul emphasizes three things in this passage. You'll see the first thing in verses 28 and 29. The second thing in verses 30 and 31. The third thing in verse 32. He emphasizes three things.

First, in verse 28 and 29, he shows us two ways that we need to think about Israel now. Paul says, when you're thinking about Israel now you have to keep two things in mind, Christian. Secondly, verses 30 and 31, he shows us how God's means of salvation relate to His end in salvation. He shows us how God's method relates to His goal. Then finally he shows us in verse 32 how God's mercy operates even in the strictest of His judgments. In doing each of those three things, in showing us each of those aspects of how God is dealing with Israel in His time and in ours. He's giving us a glimpse into the divine plan of salvation. So, let's give some attention to Paul's great words here.

I. How the Gentile church should view Israel.

First we'll begin in verse 28 and 29. Now he's going to show you how to view Israel. How should the church, how should the Gentile Christian view Israel now? He tells us in verse 28 and 29 that Gentile Christians must view the Jewish people from two perspectives simultaneously. We have to consider how they

relate to the gospel, but we also have to consider God's divine election. So Paul says, to understand Israel today, to understand the role of Israel today, you have to take into consideration their gospel rejection and also divine election. You have to consider their rejection of the gospel, but you must also consider God's divine election. So, our assessment of Israel's gospel opposition must entail both human sin and divine sovereignty. They sin by rejecting Christ and the gospel, but we must also consider God's purposes in this, Paul says.

Let's look at these two things for a few moments. In verses 28 and 29, Paul is telling you how to view Israel now and you see there in verse 28 that he summarizes in two parallel but contrasting statements. From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake. From the standpoint of God's choice, they are beloved for the sake of the Father. There you have it, gospel rejection first, divine election second. What's Paul saying? They are enemies, he says. Paul is saying that the Jewish people in his own time have by and large become God's enemies. He's saying God is an enemy with them because they have rejected the gospel. Their rejection of the gospel has brought with them, or to them, the enemies of God.

Then he adds this curious phrase. What are the three words that follow? *They are enemies for your sake*. What a strange thing to say. They are enemies of God for your sake. That's not how we're accustomed to talking about enemies. What does that mean? It's very clear, in light of what Paul's been saying in Romans chapter 11, that he's saying that the general Jewish rejection of Jesus in his gospel has resulted in a stunningly glorious reception of the grace of God by the Gentiles. He's saying that it is part of God's plan that Israel's rejection of her own Messiah would result in the nation's embracing that Messiah. So they are enemies, he says, for your sake. So, even as we consider their enmity, Paul is beckoning us to have a heart of thanksgiving to God for the amazing way in which he brought us Gentiles into His kingdom in the first place.

Then he goes on to say in the second half of verse 28, the second thing: they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. They are enemies for your sake, that's the gospel rejection, but they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. There is the divine election. In other words, Paul is saying that the Jewish people continue to enjoy a unique position in God's redeeming purposes not because of something in them, but because of the promise He made to their fathers, the patriarchs, the covenant of grace. Paul is saying, "Now here, Gentile Christian, here is how you need to think about Israel. On the one hand, she has rejected the gospel and those who reject the gospel will be visited with the judgment of God, the condemnation of God, the enmity of God. At the same time, God is not finished with His ancient people yet. His gifts and His calling are irrevocable," he will say in verse 29, referring back to those things mentioned in Romans chapter 9 verse 4 at the beginning of this section, the covenant, the promises. God is not done with His ancient people.

Paul is teaching many practical lessons in this passage. For one thing, Paul is emphasizing for the umpteenth time that whether you are Jew or Gentile, if you reject Christ you are at enmity with God. That's not a very politically correct thing to say today. Seems out of date, seems intolerant. Maybe you've heard people over the last three or four months say that "people that believe things like that bomb world trade centers." "If you really believe your god is the only god and he is the only way, well, you're intolerant you are a purveyor of hatred in this world."

What Paul is saying is that if you are not a friend of Christ, you are His enemy. If you have not embraced the one true God through Jesus Christ our Lord, He is at enmity with you. That is what Paul is saying. Absolutely crystal clear.

And some might say, "Paul and Jesus would never say something like that." Try this on for size. Matthew chapter 12 verse 30, "He who is not with Me is against Me." Now, that's not some contorted, small-minded, narrow-minded, mean spirited, fundamentalist extremist. That's Jesus Christ our Lord. "He who is not with Me is against Me."

I want to say two things about the concept that that belief is intolerant and the cause of hatred. The first thing is this: if what Jesus and Paul say is true about reality, that there is one God and that He is loved and worshiped and experienced only through faith in Jesus Christ, then to say otherwise, would in fact be the ultimate act of hate. If He is the only way of salvation and I tell you 'anyway will do' then that is unloving. Reality is like Jesus and Paul say that reality is, and it is, because Jesus created it.

The second thing is this: toleration, which by the way, Christians invented, toleration is not based on an absence of truth and relativism as it is taught today. In the absence of truth tolerance will not last, because something always fills the truth void. Usually it's power and power is the most intolerant thing in this world and it was Christians who spoke truth to power who invented tolerance, Tolerance is not built on saying that everybody can have their own beliefs as long as what they believe doesn't matter. That's intolerance. Tolerance is built upon the command of God and the universal moral principles which He has woven into this reality, among which are teachings such as the image of God in man, which say that no matter how unbelieving a human being is, he still an image-bearer of God, therefore I must treat him in accordance with that dignity, no matter how he believes, no matter how he feels about me. So therefore tolerance is rooted in truth, not in the absence of it. You can be assured that when the purveyors of modern tolerance theory finally win, then tolerance will not last long. We are already seeing it crumbling all around us, but I digress.

Let us go back to what Paul is saying. Why does Paul tell us that we need to have this two-fold view of the Jewish people? Well, for many reasons. First of all, because he doesn't want Gentile Christians to boast and view themselves as better than the Jewish people. He doesn't want Gentile Christians saying, "You

know, when it all boils down to it, the fact is they didn't believe and we did" and puff the chest out. Faith is a gift, my friend. Faith is the most unnatural think that there is in a fallen world. Faith isn't something that is innate to the human heart. Faith is an exotic transplant into the human soul. And if Gentile Christians puff themselves up and say, "Ultimately the difference between us and between the Jewish people is that they failed to believe and we believed," they have failed to realize that God gives faith. Faith is a grace; it's the greatest of graces.

Secondly, Paul tells us this because he does not want the Gentiles to cease to evangelize the Jewish people. You can imagine the meeting of the mission committee there in Rome: "Paul, our demographic studies are showing to us that for every Jewish person coming to Christ in Rome and the surrounding area, there are twenty Gentiles coming to Christ. Now, the Spirit is clearly moving amongst the Gentiles. We are wasting mission dollars going to the Jewish people. They are not receptive." How did Paul begin this book? "To the Jew first and also to the Greek." Paul is saying, "Oh no, Christian, you've always got to have a heart to go with the gospel to the Jewish people."

Now look my friends, I know that that is going to win no friends for us amongst the Jewish people today. They see Jewish evangelism by Christians as the supreme example of intolerance and aggression and hate. Again, let me ask you a question. If this is the truth, and Jesus and Paul say that it is, would it not be more hateful not to take this truth to the Jewish people? When your Jewish friend says to you, "This is offensive to me," should you not respond, "I understand that my friend, but I do this for two reasons. I do it because in Romans chapter 11 verse 28 God told me I had to and I do it because I love you. It's the supreme expression of my love to share with you the gospel. I understand that it is offensive, but I do it because the book tells me to, I do it because God tells me to, and I do it because I love you and I want you to share in the glories promised to your own Fathers." Paul tells these Gentile Christians this because he doesn't want them to fail in their hope for what God will do amongst His people. He does not want them to fail to hope for God's saving work amongst the Jewish people. So there is Paul's teaching in verses 28 and 29. Two ways we have to think about the Jewish people simultaneously.

II. God's method and goal.

Then in verses 30 and 31 he shows us how God's end relates to His means. How the method of God in salvation relates to the goal of God in salvation. He's pulling back the curtain and He's saying, let me show you something marvelously wise and intricate that God is doing in salvation. What is the goal of God in His plan of salvation? Well, we could turn to many places to see it, but turn with me to the book of Ephesians for a moment, chapter 2, verse 11. "Therefore remember, that formally you, the Gentiles in the flesh who are called Uncircumcision by the so-call Circumcision which is performed in the flesh by

human hands - remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in this world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were formally far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the law of commandments contained in the ordinances that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death and enmity. AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

The whole point is that the two are being brought into one, one family, one temple, one house, one tree, one olive tree. God is bringing believing Jews, believing Gentiles, and making them into this one family, this one body, this one people, people for themselves.

In Romans 11, verses 30 and 31, God says, interestingly enough, the way that He is working to those to bring those two groups into one beautifully witnesses to the goal of bringing the two groups into one. In Romans 11 verse 30 He says, look Gentiles, there was a time when you were all disobedient. You did not know Christ, you did not know the gospel, you did not embrace it. For thousands of years My people Israel believed in Me while you were in your immorality and disobedience. But now you Gentile Christians, in God's mercy, He has used the disobedience of Israel to show you mercy. Israel had been since the time of Adam waiting for the coming of her Messiah. When the Messiah came, for whom she had been hoping, she rejected Him. Can you imagine a greater tragedy? The Apostle Paul says, in precisely that tragedy God was working to show mercy to the Gentile to the ends of the earth.

But He's not finished, because in verse 31, He says the flip side in the same way. Though Israel now is unbelieving, though Israel now is disobedient, through the mercy that God is showing through you Gentiles He is going to show mercy to His ancient people so that their disobedience that led to the mercy you received will lead to their mercy. So that as His goal is to bring the two groups into one, so His means show the mutuality of blessing that exist between the two groups. What He does amongst the Jews He does for the sake of the Gentiles. What He does amongst the Gentiles, He does for the sake of the Jews.

So Paul shows you this amazingly intricate, surprising plan of God. Why?

Because He wants you to admire the wisdom and the intricacy and the surprising character of God's plan of redemption. We never could have made that up. You never would have guessed it. You would have never written that out in the story of redemption, that you were making up in your own mind. Only God could have created such a plan. God's goal of oneness amongst His people, Jew and Gentile, is reflected in the reciprocity of the saving plan. What happens to Israel impacts the Gentile, and what happens to the Gentile impacts Israel.

III. God has mercy even in judgment.

Then finally in verse 32, Paul shows you that God has a mercy agenda even in His severe judgments. God's merciful purposes are at work even in the hardening of the Gentiles and Jews. He's reminding us here that any assessment of gospel opposition must keep in mind God's merciful purposes in His decree. In verse 32, he says that in the wise and redeeming plan of God He had a purpose, and His purpose was in both the disobedience of the Jews and the Gentiles and that purpose was? To show mercy to both the Jews and the Gentiles. Listen to the words, "God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all." Now I need to pause here and say very quickly that this passage gives absolutely no comfort to universalists, those who teach that all in fact are in saving favor and relation to the one true God. That idea is totally out of accord with what Paul is saying in the context of the passage, and of course, it is also out of accord with what Paul says elsewhere. The doctrine of universalism, whether it be explicit or implicit, leads to a spiritual lethargy which is soul killing. To say that all are already saved is to say, 'peace, peace where there is no peace' and that is hateful, it is not loving. Even though you and I will know universalists who are among the most loving kind people we have ever met, they are in serious disagreement with what the Apostle Paul has to say. At any rate, Paul's point is this: that as there was a time when Gentiles and Jews had been in disobedience, even in those times God was at work for mercy in order to show His mercy both to Jew and Gentile. Paul is again showing us this that we might admire the overwhelming mercy that pervades God's plan. Even in this severe judgment against Israel because of her unbelief God has a purpose for mercy.

You know, when you think about it, all men, all mankind is like Golem. We're ugly, we're self serving and yet God loves a multitude that no man can number so much that He gives His own Son and He draws us out of our disobedience using even the times of disobedience for the purposes of His mercy into a saving relationship with Him. The Apostle Paul wants us to pause and admire how the operation of God's mercy is always at work in the most surprising places. We look around and we see friends who are heartened in unbelief, we see evil acts in this world and we are tempted to say, "Why this, why that?" Paul's answer is, "Don't ever think that God's mercy is not in operation. It's always in operation. Let's pray and then let's sing it to God's praise. Let's pray."

Our Lord and our God, we're so often tempted to ask, "Why. Why this, why that?" Paul teaches us here that the answer is, "Because He was pleased to do so and because it serves the greater interest of His mercy." Now the hard thing is believing that, so help us to do it. In Jesus name. Amen.

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