

Mystery

Romans 11:25-32 on November 12, 2023

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Please read Romans 11:25-32 before going further in this transcript.

Romans 11:25 begins, “I do not want you to be ignorant of *this mystery*, brothers and sisters....” Anyone else like a good mystery? When I was in about 6th or 7th grade, I fell in love with mystery books: the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, or whatever else I could get my hands on! There’s nothing quite like digging into a good mystery! When the New Testament talks about mystery, there’s a particular nuance to it; mystery is referring to something that’s divinely revealed by God. This isn’t quite the same as cracking the clues in a good Hardy Boys book. Instead, mystery is something that God reveals to mankind because He wants us to know it.^{1 2 3} When Paul phrases it this way in verse 25, “I do not want you to be ignorant,” he’s not trying to insult anyone. This is his way of indicating that he has something particularly important to reveal to his 1st century readers, AND, to you and me today as well.⁴ My Study Bible states it nicely: “The Christian mystery is not secret knowledge for a few. It is a revelation of divine truths – once hidden but now openly proclaimed.”⁵ In other words, by God’s own foreknowledge and predestined plan, certain things that were concealed in the Old Testament have now been revealed in the New Testament. What the Old Testament concealed, the New Testament has revealed.

Paul talks about this at the end of his letter, in Romans 16:25-26, he concludes... “...the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the *mystery* hidden for long ages past, but *now* revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the *Gentiles* might come to the obedience that comes from faith.”^{6 7} So, what exactly is “this mystery”

¹ “Mystery” refers to “something formerly hidden or obscure but now revealed by God for all to know and understand.” NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1909-1910 footnote on Romans 11:25.

² Mystery refers to “certain aspects of God’s fulfillment of his plan that were not clear before Christ came.” NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2323 footnote on Romans 16:25.

³ 1 Timothy 3:16 reveals the mystery of Christ’s incarnation and resurrection. Ephesians 3:4-11 reveals the mystery of the Church, how Christ brings together believing Jews and Gentiles into one body, the Church. 1 Corinthians 15:50-53, reveals the mystery of our resurrection bodies, “Things about the resurrection body that were not understood but are now revealed.” NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1947 footnote on 1 Corinthians 15:51.

⁴ “Paul did not want his Gentile brethren to be uninformed about this ‘mystery.’ He used the statement “I do not want you to be ignorant” when he had something to say that was especially important (cf. Rom 1:13; 1 Cor 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor 1:8; 1 Thess 4:13). It is always accompanied by the vocative adelphoi, ‘brothers.’” (Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 223.)

⁵ NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2013 footnote on Colossians 1:26.

⁶ “Paul often associates the ‘mystery’ with including Gentiles in the people of God.” NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2323 footnote on Romans 16:26.

⁷ 1 Peter 1:10-12 makes this intriguing revelation, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.” So, we are living during an incredible juncture in God’s salvation plan. A number of mysteries have been revealed to us, that were not yet known to prior generations.

that's so important for us to now understand? Well, first of all, it's the mystery that believing Gentiles will be fully included in God's people, as full members of God's family, with all of the same rights and privileges. As we talked about last week, Gentiles will be grafted in to the same olive tree. This doesn't mean that God has rejected the Jews, nor does it mean that the Jews have stumbled beyond recovery. What it means is that the hardening that the Israelites are currently experiencing, is part of God's providential plan to bring many Gentiles to faith.

To be clear, Gentile believers are not replacing Israel. Nor is the New Testament church replacing Israel as God's people. God is enfolding all of the Jewish and Gentile believers together, into one people of God. Jesus Christ fulfills all of God's promised blessings for those who put their faith in him. He fulfills them for believing Jews, and He fulfills them for believing Gentiles as well.⁸ In his book, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Pastor Fred Martin explains Romans 11 this way: "The olive tree represents the people of God. ...In this illustration, Paul does not teach that God has cut down the olive tree and planted another one in its place. That would be a genuine replacement of Israel with the church. Nor does Paul teach that God planted another olive tree next to the original one, as if God had one plan for the Jews and a different one for the Gentiles. Instead, Paul teaches that God has grafted the Gentile believers onto the original Jewish tree, so that there remains one tree, which now includes Jews and Gentiles who have entrusted themselves to Jesus. The illustration emphasizes the continuity that exists between God's work in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Israel has not been replaced. Instead, the people of God have grown through Christ to include non-Jews who believe in the Jewish Messiah."^{9 10}

This is what Romans 11:25 is talking about, "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening *in part until* the full number of the Gentiles has come in." So the mystery that God made known to mankind in the 1st century was that Israel's hardening was part of God's providential will.¹¹ In this way, God will bring the full number of Gentiles to faith. The reason verse 25 says that Israel's hardening is "in part," is that there were some believing Jews in Paul's day. Romans 11 refers to these believing Jews as "the remnant;" which we talked about two weeks ago.

What's perhaps even more intriguing in verse 25 is this word "*until*." This indicates that Israel's hardening is not permanent, it's not forever. This is further reinforced by Romans 11:11 from last week, "...Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not

⁸ See the excellent discussion by Pastor Fred Martin in his book, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Deep River Books, Sisters, OR, 2016, chapter 8, "Is This Replacement Theology?"

⁹ Frederic M. Martin, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Deep River Books, Sisters, OR, 2016, p. 141.

¹⁰ "ultimately there is only one people of God. Gentile believers and Jewish believers belong to the same tree. [They are nourished by the same root and connected by the same faith.]" Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 2nd Ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 156.

¹¹ "Mystery... a purpose of God that previously has not been revealed. ...probably it refers to the process of Jewish hardening followed by gentile salvation followed by Jewish salvation." Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 2nd Ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 153.

at all!” And it fits nicely with verse 12 as well, “...how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!” As Pastor Eric mentioned last week, in Romans 11 God’s blessing ricochets back and forth between Israel and the Gentiles. The large majority of ethnic Israel rejected God, but God, did NOT, reject them. Apparently, God is not yet finished with the Jews! As John Stott puts it: “Paul seems to be saying, there will be a widespread turning of Jews to Christ.”¹² So here is a key part of “this mystery” of which Paul doesn’t want the believers in Rome to be ignorant. And God doesn’t want us to be ignorant of it either >>> God has a plan for the future salvation of Israel.

I’d like you to imagine something with me: Picture ethnic Jews all around the world, including the entire nation of Israel. Can you see them? Now imagine all of them, together at one time, coming to faith in Jesus Christ as their Messiah. Imagine their broad-ranging acceptance of Jesus on a global scale. Imagine the vast majority of ethnic Jews becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus by finally accepting Him as their Messiah. Now that, would be absolutely incredible! That would be way more significant than who is occupying a particular land mass in the Middle East! The spiritual recovery of the Jewish people, “their full inclusion” in God’s salvation, would bring such incredibly great spiritual riches to our world. This is a key part of “this mystery” that Paul is revealing here in Romans 11.^{13 14} In the words of Romans 11:15, “...what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” What a joy-filled and glorious time in human history this will be! A time of great spiritual blessing throughout the entire world, perhaps even becoming the catalyst for the greatest spiritual awakening in the history of mankind!^{15 16}

Now, we need to be careful not to get ahead of ourselves here, by allowing our excitement about this mystery to spin off in unhealthy directions. We have to admit that there is plenty of debate over exactly what these verses are alluding to. At the same time, there is WAY too much End Times speculation going on in our world today. There are WAY too many End Times preppers, who are running wild in our world today with conspiracy theories, and off-the-wall survival plans. Only God Himself, in His perfect foreknowledge, knows exactly what will unfold for ethnic Israel, and exactly when it will unfold on His divine timeline. I know that some of us are incredibly eager to know every detail, but God has only revealed so much of this mystery. There’s a lot that we don’t know, a lot that we can’t know, and a lot that we don’t need to know! (In all of this, God

¹² Citing John Stott, Frederic M. Martin, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Deep River Books, Sisters, OR, 2016, p. 143.

¹³ What Romans 11 seems to be indicating, is that “At a future time the majority of Jews will come to faith in their Messiah, and their trust in him will then usher in the fullness of God’s plan.” Frederic M. Martin, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Deep River Books, Sisters, OR, 2016, p. 144.

¹⁴ Particularly Romans 11, verses 12 and 25.

¹⁵ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1909 footnote on Romans 11:15.

¹⁶ As someone who holds to a premillennial understanding of the End Times, I could see this possibly being fulfilled at Christ’s premillennial return and during His 1,000-year reign on planet earth. But I prefer not to get into all of this at this point in Romans.

simply expects us to trust Him, as He unleashes His own master redemptive plan, according to His own perfect timetable.)¹⁷

So this mystery that Paul mentions in verse 25, doesn't just include "the full number of Gentiles" coming to faith, but it also includes "all Israel," it includes the ethnic Jews. Romans 11:26-27 goes on, "and in this way, all Israel will be saved. As it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. 27 And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." Now this phrase "all Israel" has been the source of much discussion among Bible scholars.¹⁸ After researching this quite a bit this week, it seems most likely that this is referring to the ethnic Jews, to the Israelite descendants of Jacob. New Testament Professor Robert Mounce explains it best - throughout this section of Romans, Paul has been comparing Gentiles and Jews as separate ethnic groups.¹⁹ So the most natural reading of verse 26 would be in reference to the future salvation of a large portion of the Israelites. We should also note that we don't necessarily need to be overly literal with this word "all." As my Study Bible notes, the Old Testament uses the expression "all Israel" for "a significant or representative number of Israelites."²⁰ In other words, "all Israel" doesn't necessarily mean every single ethnic Jew, but instead it's a way of referring to an overwhelming majority of Jews.

Let's be crystal clear on one thing, regardless of who is included in "all Israel" or when their salvation occurs, it will only happen through faith in Jesus Christ. Last week Romans 11:23 made it clear that the Jews can easily be grafted back into the olive tree, but ONLY on one very important condition: "...if they do not persist in unbelief...." With this in mind, there's no reason to wonder if maybe somehow "all Israel" will be given some kind of a special pass, which gets all of the Jews into heaven, apart from faith in Christ. There's no special privileged access for them, just because they have a connection to the patriarchs, which would somehow absolve them from their sin. So even though verse 28 declares that God loves the Israelites on account of the

¹⁷ In Acts 1:7, Jesus reminds His followers, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." Also consider Deuteronomy 29:29 and Mathew 24:36.

¹⁸ "All Israel" could refer to the full number of Israelites who come to faith past, present, and future, or it could refer to all of spiritual Israel, the full number of believing Jews and Gentiles (consider Romans 9:4). Or, it could be Paul's reference to a large influx of Jews into the Christian faith at a later time in history.

¹⁹ "Earlier commentators tended to take 'all Israel' to mean 'spiritual Israel,' that is, all believers, Jew and Gentile alike. But throughout this entire section Paul had been comparing Gentile and Jew as separate ethnic groups. It would have been highly unlikely for him to have blurred this crucial distinction when it came time for a summarizing conclusion." (Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 224–225.)

²⁰ "All Israel' need not mean every single Israelite. The Old Testament uses this expression for a significant or representative number of Israelites." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2314 footnote on Romans 11:26.

patriarchs, that doesn't change their path to salvation.²¹ ²² Belief in Jesus Christ will be the *only* way that *any* Jew will ever be saved, whether now or in the future.²³

Verses 26-27 highlight this truth, "...As it is written: The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. 27 And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." This is in reference to the prophecy of Isaiah 59:20-21 which points to the coming of the Messiah in Romans 11:26-27.²⁴ Now this could refer to either Jesus' 1st coming, 2,000 years ago, or to His 2nd coming, at some time in the future. This is the subject of even further debate, but what matters most is that the One who delivers the Jews from their godlessness and takes away their sin, is the same One who does it for us Gentiles: Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the Savior of the world! Jesus is the deliverer who comes from Zion! Friends, the Gospel is "A Gospel for All Peoples," and there are no alternative routes for different people groups.²⁵

This is highlighted by Paul's crescendo in Romans 11:30-32, "Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." Right before his final doxology of praise, which we'll look at next week, Paul is now making a concluding corporate summary about the two different groups that he's been discussing: Jews and Gentiles. *Both* of these ethnic groups have been disobedient, and *both* are in need of receiving the same mercy. To be clear, God having mercy "on them all," is in no way suggesting some sort of universalism here, as though every person will eventually be saved. That would go against everything that Paul has been teaching us about the gospel in the first 11 chapters.²⁶ What he's saying, is that whether we're a Jew or a Gentile, everyone has been disobedient, which puts God in a position to have mercy

²¹ "In accordance with his eternal plan, God continues to welcome them for the sake of their ancestors. Paul was not supporting the idea that merit is passed on from the patriarchs to their descendants. But they were the ones who received his call (Gen 12:1-2; Deut 7:6-7), and it was to them that he first gave his gifts. And God's gifts and call are irrevocable (cf. 1 Sam 15:29; Isa 31:2). He does not change his mind regarding the nation he called and sustained with gracious acts of provision and protection." Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 225-226.

²² Verse 29 makes it clear that "God does not change his mind with reference to his call. Even though Israel is presently in a state of unbelief, God's purpose will be fulfilled in her." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1910 footnote on Romans 11:29. God's gifts to ethnic Israel include the list we looked at back in Romans 9:4-5. God's irrevocable call to ethnic Israel has to do with them being His special chosen people, His instrument to carry out a significant portion of His salvation plans in human history. Consider Numbers 23:19, "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"

²³ "Paul was saying that beyond the current period of Israel's UNBELIEF there would come a time when believing Jews would turn to Christ in faith. They would join the faithful remnant and believing Gentiles to complete the family of God, which stretches throughout all of redemptive history. (Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 225.)

²⁴ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1910 footnote on Romans 11:26.

²⁵ "Paul is under no illusions about the 'equal truth' of Judaism and Christianity. Jews need Christ." Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, sidebar on top of p. 155.

²⁶ For example, see Romans 2:8, which makes it clear that there will be wrath and anger for those who reject the truth and follow evil.

on all of those who believe.²⁷ ²⁸ Galatians 3:22 says it this way, “But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.”

Before we wrap up today, let’s go back to verse 25 and touch on something we skipped over earlier, “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited....” Not only does God not want us to be ignorant of this mystery, but He also doesn’t want us to be conceited. Now isn’t that an interesting reason to reveal this mystery!? Is there really that much of a problem with Gentiles being conceited? Well, apparently there was in the early church. In fact, this idea also showed up in last week’s text. Romans 11:17-21 gave us this warning: “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, *do not consider yourself to be superior* to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You [i.e. Gentiles] will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. [You Gentiles] For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.” For those of us who are Gentile believers, God’s gracious mercy in grafting us in, should humble us, rather than leading us to become arrogant. Apparently, this kind of arrogance was creeping into the early church.²⁹

And lest we think that this danger of arrogance isn’t something that Christians in other generations would ever struggle with, let’s consider just briefly, how anti-Jewish sentiment can creep into our Christian thinking. Some of us are probably familiar with these sad and painful lessons from church history, but some of us, are probably not. It gives me no joy to recall part of this history today, but it’s a helpful and instructive warning for us, of the kind of thing that Paul is warning us about. Just two weeks ago, we honored Reformation Sunday, and we mentioned that one of our Reformation heroes is the beloved Martin Luther. Some of you may recall that I mentioned how none of these reformers had perfect theology.

With sadness, allow me to share an unfortunate example of that. Here’s something Martin Luther once wrote about the Israelites: “First, their synagogues or churches should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it. And this ought to be done for the honor of God and of Christianity in order that God may see that we are Christians... Secondly their homes should be broken down and destroyed. Thirdly,

²⁷ Many have appreciated how New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce puts it, God’s mercy is coming “on all without distinction, rather than on all without exception.” Citing F.F. Bruce, Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You*, Good Book Co., India, 2015, p. 98.

²⁸ “Since ‘there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (3:22b–23), no one can lay claim on the mercy of God. It is a free gift for all who believe regardless of ethnic background or ethical performance.” Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 226.

²⁹ We’ll come back to this idea when we get to chapters 14-15 which talk about those with weaker and stronger faith.

they should be deprived of their prayer books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught....”³⁰ Well, Luther’s quote goes on to list even more actions that he recommended Christians take against the Jews, but I think we get the gist. More importantly, I hope we get the warning. In the words of Romans 11:18, let us not consider ourselves to be superior. And in the words of verse 20, “Do not be arrogant, but tremble.”

This anti-Jewish sentiment is not always as intense as Martin Luther’s, but others have also gone after the Jews in regrettable ways throughout history. And some of this anti-Semitism continues even into our own day. With this in mind, let’s take to heart these words from pastor and theologian John Stott: “Away...with anti-Semitism. ...Christians should be ‘pro-Semitic,’ in the sense that we recognize how the people of Israel have been highly favoured by God. ...We owe them a huge spiritual debt, especially in their bequest to the world of both the Scriptures and the Christ.”³¹ Now, to be clear, this isn’t to say that we never question Israel, or that we have to wholeheartedly agree with everything they do, not at all! But, it is to say that every Gentile owes the Jewish people a certain debt of gratitude for all they’ve contributed to the gospel’s origins throughout human history. And we should be mindful of whatever role they may still have yet to play in humanity’s future.

There is so much mystery in the way that God works. On the one hand, God doesn’t want us to be ignorant of certain aspects of this mystery, on the other hand, there are SO many other aspects which God will likely never reveal to us. He’ll only reveal what we need to know, the rest will be left up to His unsearchable judgments, which we’ll look at more next week. For today, let’s give Him praise for the mystery of His grace in our lives!

³⁰ Frederic M. Martin, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Deep River Books, Sisters, OR, 2016, p. 147.

³¹ Citing John Stott, Frederic M. Martin, *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*, Deep River Books, Sisters, OR, 2016, p. 147.