

Sermon 127: Romans 11:11-15: God's Mysterious Ways

OUTLINE

Salvation in justice
Sovereignty over sin

INTRODUCTION

God works in mysterious ways, or God's ways are not our ways are familiar statements that help us to remember that there are mysteries bigger than our ability to understand. This section of Romans 9-11 is full of the complexities of these mysteries, God's distinguishing love, God's unconditional election, God's sovereignty over unbelief in the hardening of unbelievers. Well today we continue to be faced with profound mysteries. We have two mysteries facing us from these verses; that God brings salvation from justice, and that is sovereign over and uses sin to accomplish His purposes. These are called mysteries because they are surprising. Firstly, when we think of God giving justice to sinners, we would hardly think that this would result in salvation. But God works in such a way as to confound us, to humble us and to cause us to stop and take note of His profound wisdom. Similarly, we would not think of a holy God employing sin to accomplish His will but this we will see as well. Paul explains these two mysteries in 11:11-15. The first is that from God giving justice to Jews Gentiles are saved, salvation coming from justice; and secondly, through the Gentiles getting saved, the Jews are provoked to salvation through jealousy. Paul sums up these mysteries in 11:30-31, v30, 'For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience.' Paul talking about to the Gentiles about receiving salvation tells us that we received it because the Jews were judged. v31, 'so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.' Paul then speaks about how the Jews will be provoked to salvation by Gentiles enjoying salvation. Having stated these realities, Paul then launches into worship, v33, 'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!'

Paul is presently explaining the ways of God with Israel to the church in Rome. Why the Jews have not accepted their own Messiah. He has spoken of God's sovereignty in election and reprobation we now get to consider God's paradoxical saving through justice and sovereignty over sin.

Salvation in justice

A providentialist is the name for someone who uses God's acts in history, His acts of providence to explain God's actions. This is a person who does not listen to the bible but uses their own powers of discernment and interpretation to decide what a situation is saying to them. For example, the earthquake in Christchurch obviously means that God is judging Christchurch, or that if someone gets cancer it is because they have been naughty, Job's friends were all providentialists because they were certain that Job must have done some sin to provoke God's justice upon him. Many Christians take it upon themselves to be authoritative interpreters of God's actions in the world. This was the problem of the Romans. The Jews had no believed in the numbered that one would have expected, and the Roman Christians were being providentialists and drawing the wrong conclusions from God's actions. They had decided that the lack of Jewish converts must mean that God was finished with the Jews and that they were not going to be saved, that one could ignore them in evangelism and marginalise them and be insensitive to them in the life of the church.

Paul draws attention to their ignorance with a question, v11, 'So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall?' In other words, does their sin imply that they are irretrievably lost? Paul answers, 'By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.' By God acting in justice in hardening the Jews, that act of justice does not mean that He is finished with the Jews. No, it just means that God decided to save the Gentiles through whom He would then save the Jews. Paul then applies an argument from the lesser to the greater, v12, 'Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!' If their unbelief can lead to the salvation of the world, in other words, the Gentile nations; how much more will their believing lead to their full inclusion in the church. Paul is saying, do not judge Israel too quickly, don't be a providentialist and try to be the interpreter of God's actions. Don't write them off due to a big sin. Don't think of the Jews as second rate citizens in the kingdom if you allow them in the kingdom, recognise that they can be saved and fully included because of grace. We can apply this by giving a generous welcome to any who embrace Christ as saviour no matter what their past. That sin resulted in riches for the Gentile world, God brought blessing from justice, and will in turn use the Gentiles to bring about salvation among the Jews. Don't judge God's actions so quickly, you are not God and cannot possibly conceive what He is doing in history or even in your life.

Bringing salvation out of justice should ring a bell for you as a believer. The greatest tragedy that has ever happened in human history is also the greatest act of justice the world has ever seen, the death of Christ. The bible teaches that cursed is everyone that hangs upon a tree, in other words, in the OT if you were hanged it was a sign of God's judgement on you. The Jews thought that it could be safely inferred that Jesus is not favoured of God because He was killed by God, He was under God's curse. But here is the mystery and our ignorance, Jesus was not being punished for His sins but ours, He was under God's justice but not for the reasons you think but because God was seeking to bring about salvation for us.

We are foolish and often infer the wrong things from our circumstances. If we bump our heads we think that God is slapping us for sinful thoughts, if something goes wrong in our lives we think that He must not love us, or not care. If something bad happens to someone else we interpret God's actions and decide it must be a judgement. I think Paul has a big lesson for us here on not rushing to wrong conclusions as we try to understand God's actions in the world. We are to interpret God's actions by His book not by His actions. Paul in this question of Jewish salvation constantly hides behind scripture to prove the truths that God does not will to save all Jews, that God is sovereign over their unbelief, and that God is not finished with them. We must learn to think as Paul does. Erring on the side of worshipping God for His inscrutable ways and mysteries instead of pretending that we are master interpreters of God who can explain every action He has ever made. This helps us when bad things happen to us in our lives, be they in our relationships, our health, our finances, or the situation we are living in. We have always found it very difficult to know exactly what God is doing and often deceive ourselves and end up criticising God, doubting Him, blaspheming Him, jumping to wrong conclusions about other people or misunderstanding His will. I find Paul's dealing with this particular question about the Jews to be most instructive. It teaches us to suspend judgement, it teaches us to remember that there is a long history of people jumping to the wrong conclusions about what God is doing, it teaches us that the safe place to know God's will is not our emotions or our reasonings, but in God's Bible.

Another lesson to be learnt is an appreciation for God's goodness in justice. When we think of God judging sin we would think that a holy God would spend His wrath, for we are so undeserving, we would think that when true justice acts it would result in total destruction. But we see instead a God who is full of mercy, a God who is insistent on saving. In the judgement He pours out on the Israelites, and this overflows in salvation. Where else have you seen it but in God's dealings that justice and judgement result in salvation? God judges Adam and Eve, and instead of the world being ended and remade, billions of people are allowed to live and countless numbers of them saved. Or think about God pouring out His judgement on Christ, there we see the greatest judgement in human history, and it results in the greatest salvation for mankind. God's insistent goodness is poured out even when He judges. The only time that God's justice will not be tempered with this goodness is when He finally gives sin its full deserts on the last day. And here we see the Jews being judged by God, they are receiving what their sins deserve, and yet God in His goodness turns it to our good and the Gentile world experiences salvation. think of it from the OT perspective. There were various promises of God giving victory to His people, of God exalting Israel and bringing peace through judgement. If God had done this, if He had fulfilled the Jewish expectation for national emancipation and come in judgement the rest of the world would have fallen primarily under judgement. But God in His mercy and His desire to have a people from all nations rather gave Israel judgement for their rejection of Christ and sent out a world wide missionary movement to bring in a people from all nations. Salvation comes from God's judgements. Here we see the heart of our missionary God, the heart of our God who seeks to save sinners and we should be reignited in our desire to all things result in the salvation of lost sinners. We should be heartened by God's dealings and not doubt how He can take impossible situations, even the post-Christian culture we are living in and use it to bring about salvation. For example, although God is active in hardening this generation by handing them over to their own unbelief and lusts and this is resulting in a society that is pagan, we will not lose hope in God's wisdom and power to use these judgments as a double edge sword. On the one hand He will accomplish His purposes to judge but on the other through these judgements, in His wisdom and power accomplish His purposes to save. To see God act in this way should remind us that withdrawal is not our Christian response but faithful and hopeful witness. We need not be fearful or pessimistic for God while pouring out His judgements fulfils His purposes to save. We must not lose heart when we see friends and family entrenched in sin, we see here that God overrules and works out His purposes to save. The Romans were wrongfully leaping to the wrong conclusions about others salvation, the lesson is that we should not.

Sovereignty over sin

The second point that Paul has for us, is that God uses the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy thereby saving some. He had stated this truth in v11, and now he unwraps it a little. V13, 'Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry 14 in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.' We see here that Paul addresses the Gentile part of his audience. These are the ones who might have jumped to wrong conclusions about God's dealings with the Jews. The point that Paul was called as an apostle to the Gentiles might have been seen as confirmation to some of the prejudices that the Jews were now cast off. Paul counters any wrong conclusions drawn from the fact that he is an apostle to the Gentiles by outlining God's method. That by means of the Gentiles being saved and entering into the blessings that had been promised to the Jews, they would be provoked to jealousy and God would save them. In other words, through the sin of jealousy the Jews would be provoked to salvation.

There are four points we need to draw out of this statement of Paul's. Firstly, we need to note how God is sovereign even over sin and uses it for His purposes. This is a hard teaching for many to accept. Is God sovereign over creation, many say yes; is God sovereign in salvation, many say yes; is God sovereign over the devil and all sinful actions, including the sinful actions of believers and unbelievers, and here where we get more specific we feel many more Christians drawing back from a full affirmation. However, historically this has been the belief of the Reformed churches. Let me read you a statement from the 1689 chapter 5 paragraph 4, 'The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that His determinate counsel extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men;**11** and that not by a bare permission, which also He most wisely and powerfully binds, and otherwise orders and governs,**12** in a manifold dispensation to His most holy ends;**13** yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceeds only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.**14**

11 Rom. 11:32-34; 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chron. 21:1

12 2 Kings 19:28; Ps. 76:10

13 Gen. 1:20; Isa. 10:6,7,12

14 Ps. 1;21; 1 John 2:16.'

Paragraph 4 has three basic parts, an assertion, a qualification, and a clarification. **The assertion** is, "God's almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness are so far reaching, and all pervading, that both the fall of the first man into sin, and all other sinful actions of angels and men, proceed according to His sovereign purposes." The claim is clear, 'Of course God is in control of all things including evil!' And it is His power, wisdom and goodness that are pervasively working, without compromising their own integrity (in other words He never ceases to be good), that all things proceed according to His sovereign plan. **The qualification** is "It is not that He gives His bare permission, for in a variety of ways He wisely and powerfully limits, orders and governs sinful actions, so that they effect His holy designs." The confession is telling us how He is in control. Firstly, with a type of permission, but not a bare permission. In other words, God's permissive will, but this is defined as not being a bare permission. That is, there is never total and free permission, a hands off affair, but only as far as they affect God's purposes. God is hands on. Secondly, God limits the sinful actions, and orders their arrangement. And we are also told that He governs these sinful actions that the damage, the consequences, every aspect of their working and effect is under His control. There are no unforeseen consequences, no unmanageable fallout or unfortunate collateral damage that is not ordained. And just in case you are getting the wrong idea, the confession adds **the clarification**, "Yet the sinfulness involved in the actions proceeds only from angels and men and not from God who, being holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin." Although part of His decree, He is not the author of sin, nor does He approve of it. It is obvious to see that the confession seems to be making some self-contradictory statements, that God works out things, including all sin according to His purposes, yet is not the author of it, and that only the creature is responsible for sin. The reason the confession speaks like this is because of verses like Romans 11. Here we can clearly see that God willed all to be consigned under sin and through jealousy brings the Jews to salvation. we cannot draw wrong conclusions and assume God is the author of sin, we have been looking at some of His mechanisms where through passive actions, through second causes, through His

permissive will where He allows things to happen that sin might be made the means of its own judgement and destruction. Here we see that jealousy is used by God to accomplish His purposes.

This raises the question of why jealousy. Through jealousy the Jews would come to value something they thought they did not need, salvation in Christ. They would be taught to want that which they despised. Through other enjoying what should have been theirs they will come to see their error. Here I guess is where we are challenged. Do you live your life in Christ in such a way as to make people jealous? Now let's be very clear, we are not to flaunt our lives, nor seek to provoke envy and jealousy in a sinful exhibitionism. Nor are we to sell the gospel by appealing to felt needs. For example we don't seek riches to get the world to be jealous of our first world living as a sign of God's blessing. No I think Paul is thinking about the reality, that when we live our lives in the richness of the gospel, and the overflow is evident in many different ways, there will be a recognition in the heart of even the unbeliever that this is the truth. In other words, when we are living the healthy Christian life, there will be an attraction, there will be an aroma of life, there will be salt and light which will cause the hearts of unbelieving Jews and all forms of unbelievers to thirst for the truth.

For example, Jesus gave us the new commandment and told us that the world would know we are His disciples if we love one another in the same way that He loved us. When we like Christ forego our privileges and rights, when we put others needs before our own, when we sacrificially serve one another with a foot washing life this will speak volumes. We live in a world where people divide into parties of likeminded people where people do not handle well those who differ from them. The local church should be a love community that speaks of a family love that surpasses the family love in the families of unbelievers. The way we help the aging, the way we minister to the youth, the way we give to the needy, the way we support the hurting. Does your life in the community of the church provoke others to desire this new creation life given expression on earth?

Jesus also taught us that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be blessed and filled. In a world that is enslaved to pleasure, in a world addicted to self-service for happiness, in our society that values sexual freedom over the right of life of a baby in the womb, to find happiness and satisfaction in holiness will speak volumes. At first they may think you are mad to deny yourself, but with a long life of committed holiness and seeing that their paths have not yielded the promised pleasures of sin. They will see in our lives the happiness that comes from holiness and it will be a testimony that pulls at them.

The blessedness of being poor in spirit, of seeing ourselves as bankrupt of goodness and needing God to justify by Christ's righteousness; the blessedness of mourning our sin and not having to lie to ourselves about own goodness but to own it and see forgiven when we repent and believe; the peace of God that transcends understanding and the joy inexpressible and full of glory, these experiences are what we are made for and are empty without. When we have the joy of our salvation in a world that can never be happy as it pursues the empty pleasures of sin, this speaks of truth and life and stirs desire in the hearts of unbelievers.

The normal healthy Christian worldview and life is what will provoke the unbeliever to Christ. God will use the truth as it is demonstrated in our lives to draw them to seek Christ. When

the modern identity of being an evolved animal that has no purpose for living except survival and no eternal purpose after death meets the bible's truth of being made in God's image for eternal fellowship with one another before God in a sinless world, the inner void created for these things cries out within them. As C S Lewis put it, we have desires nothing in this world can satisfy, and these point us to God.

In the case of the Jews, it would have been all of those promises of the New Covenant, the promise of forgiveness, the Spirit, hearts of flesh, an inward compulsion to serve God, etc, these would have been inherited by the Gentiles and not the Jews and they would have sought to have the inheritance that was promised to them. In other words, the normal, healthy Christian experience was what they sought and awaited and would have been provoked by in the church. It is the same today. This is immensely practical. Walk closely with God and know the joy of your salvation, read your bible and learn the truth, walk in the ways of holiness, be satisfied in God and not in sin, avail yourself of prayer as the way to meet with God and fulfil your soul that you don't need to turn to sin, be a godly husband, wife, child, worker, friend. Live out the truth and it will resonate in the hearts of every person because these things are written there. Love as Christ loved, live as He lived, believe what He spoke and your life will be salt and light and will attract others to Christ. This is not enough to save them, they need to hear the gospel and to believe in order to receive the righteousness by which they can be justified, but it is a necessary part that God has appointed. That through the demonstration of a changed life His power to save is magnified and people are drawn to Christ.

Thirdly, note that Paul sees this saving of the Gentiles and the provoking of the Jews to salvation a means to saving some, v14. I point this out because many have used these verses to prove an end time revival that will save the vast majority of the Jews. I see no textual evidence to support this view in these verses. Paul is talking of his present ministry and talks of God saving some, not most or all in some future national revival.

Fourthly, notice that the Jews will experience 'life from the dead' v15. I point this out to show that Paul does not see two ways of being saved but only one, every sinner needs to be regenerated, every sinner needs to be united to the resurrection of Christ, this is the only way to be saved. Some have tried to interpret this statement as a future revival in Israel but we can see that this language of life from the dead is in keeping with Jew who have sinned in the past being fully saved when they believe and not being second class Christians. This will be the emphasis of what Paul draws out in the rest of the text.

In conclusion let us remind ourselves of what Paul has been seeking to show us. Paul wants us to know God's plan of salvation for the Jews, he wants us to marvel at the mystery of God's working. He recognises that God is doing the unexpected. God saves through an outpouring of justice, this is a show of His goodness, and God is sovereign over the sinful actions of men, and uses even our jealousy as an instrument to bring us to Christ.