

## **Sermon 131: Romans 11:28-31: God's gifts**

### **OUTLINE**

Christ and the temple  
Christ's and the priesthood

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Third Temple is the name given to the Temple which certain eschatological views hope to see rebuilt in the Millennium. Presently on the temple mount in Jerusalem where Solomon's temple once stood now sit two Muslim structures preventing the rebuilding of any temple. Orthodox Jews are not allowed to pray on the Temple mount and so pray at what is called the Wailing Wall. But everyday they pray for the rebuilding of Ezekiel's temple. Orthodox Jews are divided as to whether any sacrifices need to be offered in the temple because when Herod's temple was destroyed the Rabbi's taught the now templeless Jews that prays were the sacrifices God desired not blood sacrifices. Not so with modern day Christians. There are many Christians who because they read OT prophecy in a certain way insist that Ezekiel's Temple must be rebuilt in the Millennium, and that this temple will observe all the sacrifices mentioned in Ezekiel, observe the Saturday Sabbath, have a Davidic royal line with princes, and other OT things like circumcision and feast days. One of the verses used to argue this point is Romans 11:29, 'For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.' They think that the list of privileges in 9:4-5 must be the gifts Paul means here so the Land, the temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial system, the feast days and many other OT practices can have a legitimate revival in the Millennium.

So today we are going to do three things. We are going to give a brief interpretation of 11:28-31; then we will demonstrate how Christ fulfils the temple and then how He fulfils the priesthood. We hope to show how any return to these things is going backwards and runs the risk of denying the gospel. And I trust you will be better positioned to know the strength of the salvation we have in Christ.

V28, 'As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.' Paul is in the process of explaining the mystery he mentioned in v25. He is headed towards the worship of v33-36 which falls down in adoration before God's inscrutable ways. We have looked at the various interpretations that have fought over this verse and we have concluded that the mystery which is intended for us to understand is twofold, firstly, that God has an elect among Israel and that He never intended every Jew to be saved and embrace the Messiah, this he calls partial hardening, the remnant, or the Israel within Israel. Secondly, we have seen God's surprising design that by means of Jewish unbelief Gentiles believe, and then by Gentile belief Jews are provoked to faith. Resulting in God's plan of salvation being that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith into one olive tree until Christ's second coming.

Continuing with that mystery and seeking to amplify the tension Paul makes a series of 'difficult' statements. In v28 he tells us that the elect Jews are both enemies of God and beloved of God at the same time. They are enemies of God for our sake, namely for the sake of Gentiles believing. But they are beloved for the sake of the Father's, in other words on account of the various promises made to the Father's about being made a nation. The Gentiles in Rome assumed that they were only enemies and so Paul adds v29 to further argue why they must also be beloved, and the Gentiles accept that they can be saved, v29, 'For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.'

Now this is the verse we will be seeking to develop. On the one hand we have those who say that the gifts and calling are things bound up with a future national, geo-political and religious re-establishing. In other words any promise ever made to Israel which does not seem to have literally been fulfilled must still be literally fulfilled in the Millennium. We will be stopping here for a while to demonstrate that this thinking is wrong and show how the Bible in fact shows what that fulfilment looks like. Today we will only have time to consider the notion of a future temple and priesthood as impossible given the finished work of Christ. Let me assert here that the words 'gifts and calling' interpret the words, 'and in this way all Israel will be saved.' The words, 'gifts and calling' are synonyms for salvation not a future national geo-political and religious reestablishment. In particular Paul has made reference to the New Covenant blessing of sins forgiven. So for us to intrude our questions that relate to national reinstatement is to read into the text and force it to answer questions it is not answering. In Romans 5:15-17 we see Paul speaking about receiving the free gift of righteousness; and in 6:23 the gift of God being eternal life. To try and invade the text with OT issues is to read the text counter to its concern. Secondly, we have the word 'calling'. How has Paul used the word calling in this letter so far? Paul talks about being called as an apostle 1:1; he talks about the Romans who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ, 1:6; those called to be saints 1:7; those whom God has predestined are called, justified and will be glorified. We can see that for Paul the word called has connotations of God working by His power to cause His people to be saved. No one can come to God unless they are drawn by His power. God's call is an effectual call, the Spirit working by the word causes us to be born again and believe. In the context of speaking about salvation for all of elect Israel this must be Paul's sense. Paul therefore is not talking about the Jews receiving land, temple, priesthood, and a Davidic throne in Jerusalem but salvation.

Next Paul puts before us what he sums up in the difficult words of v32, 'For God has consigned all to disobedience that He may have mercy on all.' In v30-31 He writes, 'For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.' Both elect Jews and Gentiles were under sin and both are brought to mercy. This of course raises a number of questions but these are nipped in the bud by Paul's ensuing worship where he places God above accusation by describing Him as inscrutable, v33-36.

### **Christ and the temple**

Now returning to the question of whether there will be a future rebuilding of the temple with Levites and sacrifices is a question we must consider. Now it is clear from Ezekiel 40-48 there is a detailed description of a temple with Levitical priests, a Most Holy Place which Ezekiel did not enter to describe, 41:4; there is an altar 43:13, which has blood sacrifices. The claim is that these are memorials but we see that they are called sin and guilt offerings, 40:39. The altar is to be purified and atoned for with the blood of bulls; goats and rams 43:20-26, and only once the altar is atoned for will God accept those who worship there, 43:27. This will be a temple for Jews only where no foreigners or uncircumcised may come 44:9. The priests can only wear linen not wool, 44:17; and must change clothes used in the temple because his garments can transmit holiness, 44:19. The Levites will also teach in the temple, they will teach the difference between clean and unclean, 44:24. The laws about foods and days will also be in force. Festivals, New Moons and Sabbaths will be binding on all. Part of the craziness that goes along with seeing Israel in prophecy is a complete failure to appreciate the finished work of Christ and the impossibility of returning

to a Levitical priesthood and temple worship system. In order to prove this we must spend some time in the NT.

Here is the principle we are following, that all the promises of God are yes and Amen in Christ, 2 Cor. 1:20, 'For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.' We take this to be an axiomatic statement. Not only do God's promises get fulfilled because of what Christ did, but many are fulfilled in Christ Himself. Think with me of just a few examples. Think of the promise of the Seed born to a woman who would crush the head of the serpent in Gen. 3:15, we see that this is Christ. Think of the promise to David of a Son who would eternally inhabit his throne, 2 Sam. 7:12-13. Think of the Abrahamic promise of land, blessing and offspring, in Christ, we gain what the land foreshadowed as we participate in Christ's inheritance of the new creation; in Christ we receive the blessing of salvation; and in Christ, who Paul tells us is the Offspring/Seed of Abraham we are children of Abraham by faith Gal. 3:16. In Jesus promises are not merely made possible, but are literally fulfilled in Him. We call this a Christocentric way of understanding the promises. Or it is also known as Christotelic, from the Greek word for end, meaning that Christ brings to a climax all that God promises, that all things lead to Christ for their meaning and fulfilment. This is the perspective, one that we have learnt to use from Scripture, that we now need to apply to the question of the temple. Sam Storms says, 'Jesus Christ and His church are the focal and terminating point of all prophecy.'<sup>1</sup>

The idea of temple begins with the shekinah glory, the manifest glory of God with His people. It was intended to be a little garden of Eden with its trees and Cherubim. This made Israel unique amongst the peoples of the earth. Initially God drew near to His people in the tabernacle that Moses built. It was for the purpose of God dwelling in the midst of His people (Ex. 25:8). The tent of meeting was the place where people drew near to God to worship and stand in His presence (Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10).

This was true too of Solomon's temple where God's glory came down that the priests could not minister (2 Chron. 5:14).

This is the background that informs John's statement that Jesus is the Word made flesh, that is God pitching His tent among us. The glory that is manifest in Christ is greater than the OT buildings (Jn. 1:14).

The tabernacle was the place that the law was preserved, Jesus is now the person that fulfils all the law. It was the place of revelation but Jesus is God's greatest word to man. It was the place of relationship and meeting, but we now more profoundly meet and have fellowship with God in union with Christ partaking of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). It was the place of forgiveness of sin by the sacrifices, but Jesus is now the lamb of God. It was the place of the mercy seat where God was propitiated on atonement day, now Christ is our propitiation. It was the place of priest's ministering, but He is the greatest priest who has offered the greatest sacrifice. It was the place of worship, but we now worship in Spirit and

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<sup>1</sup> Kingdom Come, p16.

in truth in Christ. 'In order to meet with God, to talk with Him, and to worship Him, we no longer come to a building or a tent or a structure made with human hands. We come to Jesus!<sup>2</sup> the temple is no longer the way to God, but Jesus is the way the truth and the life, His broken body is the broken veil which opens up to us the most holy place.

As the body of Christ we are also the temple with Christ as the cornerstone, the place where God's glory dwells Eph. 2:21-22, 'Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.' There is no longer a literal temple but only the organism of an expanding people (Eph. 4:16), Peter calls us 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5). We are now the temple, this idea is significantly stated in 2 Cor 6:16, 'What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' This verse and its context is an excellent display of Paul's biblical theological method where he combines verses that speak of God original intention to dwell amongst His people in the tabernacle, Lev. 26:11-12, 'I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. 12 And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.' As well as verses that speak of God's restoration and the new covenant promises to dwell with His people, taking into account the development in the plot as it moves towards consummation in Christ, Is. 52:11, 'Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the LORD.' And, Ezek. 11:19-20, 'And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.' Paul sees the church as receiving promises as he says in 2 Cor 7:1, 'Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.' Christ and His body the temple are the fulfilment of the OT promises.

This may seem like twisting the prophecies but rather I see it as a superabundant, beyond expectation answer. God always seems to undersell the amazing realities of salvation in Christ in the OT shadows, types and promises. He promised to save us by the seed of the woman, but we find in the NT that we are saved by the God-Man. He prophesied a king who would conquer the enemies of God's people; little did God's people anticipate that satan, sin and death, as well as all earthly enemies were included in this promise. God promised to dwell with His people, but we find that He not only dwells with but in and by the gift of the Spirit who has been to given to be with us forever. Circumcision is swallowed up in our participation in Christ's resurrection. The sacrifices are outshone by the most perfect offering of a human life, one who necessarily had to be born of a virgin and never sin for 33 ½ years, only to die at the hands of the Romans, and then resurrect from the dead with a never dying body. The promises of the new heavens and earth in Isaiah 65 include death, but the true fulfilment has no death. The stone of the temple has become living stone, where all are priests, all can enter the holy of holies, and all as holy as Christ by

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p18.

virtue of our union with Him. The promises of God are fulfilled exceedingly and abundantly more than you could have expected based on a literal interpretation of the promises.

What then of the literal temple? Matt. 23-24 answer this question. Matt. 23:38, 'See, your house is left to you desolate,' combined with Christ departing the temple and stopping on the Mount of Olives (24:3), a repeat of God's departure from the temple in Ezek. 11:23, 'And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.' Add to this the tearing of the curtain in Matt. 27:51 and we can only conclude, Ichabod, the glory has departed. The destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. was confirmation that the temple was now redundant and replaced by Christ. Any new temple that is built will not be a fulfilment of prophecy but a stench to God and a challenge to Christ. I understand that this is a new and strange way of reading the bible, remember our axiom, all the promises of God are yes and Amen in Him. And then think of the other side of the problem, let us say for arguments sake that there must be a literal Ezekiel's temple, we are told in Ezek. 37:28 that the temple will be eternal, this directly contradicts the teaching of Rev. 21 which teaches us that there will be no temple in the new Creation.

### **Christ and the priesthood**

Turn to Hebrews 4:14. We will take a quick walk through some chapters here to demonstrate that there is no possible way that the Levitical priesthood can be revived by God at any future time, for it would be a slight on the gospel. This letter we know is written to Jews who were feeling the pressure of persecution to return to Judaism. The letter is written to demonstrate the superiority of Christ, that He is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, that He is a greater Highpriest and offers a greater sacrifice. The superiority of Christ as priest is begun in 4:14-16. We have a list here of the ways in which Christ surpasses the Levitical priesthood. He ministers in heaven not on earth; He is not merely a man but the Son of God; He is an empathetic High priest who not only has superior qualifications but is still able to know our need and represent us to the Father; He is perfectly sinless and has enabled us to draw near with confidence for mercy unlike the OT tabernacle. 5:1-2 tells us that ordinary priests are sinful and need sacrifices and can only serve by God's appointment, v5-10 point out that Christ has been appointed to the priesthood of Melchizedek by God and was perfect throughout His life.

At the mention of Melchizedek he realises that he has made a statement that needs explanation but is not sure that the Hebrews are mature enough to hear it, so in a pastoral way he rebukes them and urges them on to maturity. There are all sorts of questions about falling away and other important matters that he raises that we will have to discuss another time but notice at the end of his exhortation and encouragement he returns to this matter in 6:20 with the mention of Christ as our Highpriest in the order of Melchizedek.

Now he is ready to explain the superiority of Christ's priesthood. He begins by taking us back to the first mention of M in the bible, to Gen. 14 where Abraham had rescued Lot and M had met him on his triumphant return and has received tithes from Abraham. M was a Gentile priest king, uniting in one person two offices that could not be united by an Israelite.

He was a worshipper of YHWH. His names are significant M means the king of righteousness, or literally 'my King is righteousness.' And Salem, is the place of Jerusalem before Israel inhabited the land, and it means peace. The book of genealogies presents this person without one and no death day details the writer picks up on to highlight that this fits with Christ who is from heaven and is resurrected.

Next the writer using an idea we are not familiar with proves the superiority of M over Aaron by showing that Levi tithed through his representative Abraham to M. And then M blesses Abraham, the writer uses this detail to argue the superiority of M over Abraham, 7:7.

Verses 11-15 give us reasons why a new priesthood must replace the Levitical priesthood. Firstly, perfection is not attainable through the Levitical priesthood and this is indicated by the revealing of a new and future Melchizedekian priesthood as prophesied in Ps. 110:4. Secondly, a change in priesthood implies a change in law, v12. This cannot be overstressed. A change in law means that there is no longer any divine warrant for the former state of affairs. If God changes the law, then God authority rests in the new order and no longer in the old. If God has changed the law and appointed Christ into a new order of priests can we think of the Levitical being revived and making the law of Christ's priesthood no longer true? Impossible! Christ is qualified to serve as priest forever by virtue of His indestructible life, but we are told in v18 that the Levitical priesthood was weak and to be superseded, 'For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.' Law changes indicate weakness and the need for improvement that is why Christ is a priest forever, there is no need to improve it and return to any other form of priesthood, the Levitical priesthood is forever replaced.

The reasons are stacked further in 7:20-22, we are told that where the old order of priests were not sworn in by oath, Christ's priesthood is sworn in by God under oath, making the priesthood permanent. Can you see how this issue is directly relevant to the question of can there be a future Levitical priesthood? These first century Jews thought they could return to a Levitical priesthood, but these arguments prove that it is impossible.

In v23-25 he points out that the Levitical priests kept dying but Christ is able to save us to the uttermost by virtue of His never dying life. That by this never dying life He 'always lives to make intercession' for us. We understand this intercession to consist of His eternal representation of the church in His righteous person. In other words, He is a perpetual memorial to the satisfaction of God's justice for every single one of our sins. His wounds always speak 'it is finished' so that there is no condemnation for those who are in Him, that there are no longer any grounds for accusation for He intercedes for us and the judge has ruled, and therefore there can be no separation from Christ. We need no Mary or angels or saints, he alone is sufficient.

Chapter 7 then ends with a sevenfold description of His perfection and sufficiency as our Highpriest. 'Holy, innocent, unstained' that is pure in His relationship before God, with mankind and within Himself. 'separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens,' He is one of us but pure and His exaltation marks His entrance into the direct presence of God and to His throne for perfect ministry on our behalf. He has offered up Himself, being both the offering and the offerer, once for all. Here we see that the Roman Catholic practice of

repeating mass is a denial of Christ. And finally we do not have a servant but the Son Himself, the Second person of the Trinity, God Himself as our priest. In this our salvation is secure from sin, the devil and all the things the world can throw at us. We need no other saviour, no other priest, no other temple, no other offering. He is enough for both Jews and Gentiles, and it is our zeal for the glory of this Saviour that we protest to any revival of shadows and imperfect types.