

The Glory of God

📖 Romans 9-11

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Today we will look at all of Romans 9-11 as a unit. I was reviewing this unit lesson by lesson and I wish I had done a better job. There are some good points and the major theme from the beginning was on the mark but there were also some things that could have been taught better and overall I wish I was clearer. Working through this section was like trying to put a puzzle together without the box. You don't know exactly what the picture is and it's really difficult to put the pieces together in the right way. Now that I've looked at every piece of the puzzle in great detail I can see in hindsight what the picture is. I can see now how certain texts of Romans, especially Romans 9, have been totally distorted away from their original intent. For example, the Moses and Pharaoh section where He shows mercy on Moses and hardens Pharaoh is not at all talking about the individuals Moses and Pharaoh. The reason it doesn't is such an interpretation is completely outside of Paul's argument. It wouldn't contribute anything to the question being answered. What Paul is arguing is relative to the covenant nation Israel and what about the nation Israel? And what Paul is basically saying is that during the OT God showed mercy to the nation Israel and Moses represents the nation Israel because he was the leader of the nation Israel; whereas Pharaoh represents Egypt, of course, but actually more than that, he represents all Gentile nations and how during the OT God did not show mercy to Gentile nations and actually hardened those who cursed Israel, such as Egypt. So it's looking at God's plan for history. Then I found a linkage with Romans 11 that I found no commentary mention and that is that the picture of hardening and showing mercy is reversed in Romans 11. Due to the nation Israel's rejection of the cross they are hardened and Gentile nations are being shown mercy. And so again, what we have is God's plan for history, a plan that began with God showing mercy to Israel and Gentile nations being hardened but in light of the nation Israel's rejection Israel is now hardened and Gentile nations are being shown mercy and in the end Israel will once again be shown mercy. And this is God's way of demonstrating His mercy in dealing with Jews and Gentiles in successive epochs of history for His own glory.

What I've done this week is worked at isolating all the individual pieces in Paul's argument and putting them together in a linear story. The difficulty with Paul is that he goes forward in time and then he goes back in time and then he goes forward again and then to the present and he assumes you know all this and he also makes the same points multiple times with slightly different nuances so that he's bouncing all over the place and it is really

difficult to follow. That is why people tend to proof text Paul and make really bad theological mistakes. I don't like it that he writes this way because I'm a linear thinker and he's not but my wife tells me that I better like it because he did it under the inspiration of the Spirit. Of course, I like Paul and the Spirit of God, but you have to grapple with why he put this together in such a confusing way and why he makes the same point three or four times in different places scattered throughout the argument. I have two answers for this. First, from the perspective of Paul as a unique person, he is a genius and this is how geniuses think. They can be thinking of one thing and twenty things at the same time as well as all the relationships and interrelationships and yet you can't write all that down at one time and so it comes out in a way to someone who is not a genius as confusing. Non-geniuses like geniuses but they also like to take the work of geniuses and straighten it out into a linear structure. So one part of the answer is that under inspiration the human author's personalities were protected and Paul's genius is reflected in his unique style of writing. Second, from the perspective of the Holy Spirit, He is wanting the Church for the last 2,000 years to work this out. In other words, He employed a genius like Paul to write on such a difficult level that the Church would have to grapple with his writings. They are simply not like other biblical authors' writings. This is apparent to anyone who spends any time with Paul. These writings and the arguments that are being made are very difficult to follow and require centuries of study, not a lifetime. It is something that is still being worked out and the Apostle Paul's writings are the most controversial, in this sense, of all. What is this man saying?

So what I have done is tried to straighten out into a linear structure all of Paul's work in Rom 9-11 and this is somewhat exciting. The unit begins in 9:1-3 with Paul's lament over the nation Israel's unbelief and ends in 11:33-36 with Paul's praise to the God for His inscrutable ways of working. What is meant there, as we will see, is not that the broad outlines of God's ways in history can't be traced out, but the minutia, the details. All that we have in Romans 9-11 is actually very simple, it is simply a general picture and yet, as I've implied, it is difficult for even someone who thinks they have some intelligence to understand. So it is very humbling to realize that these chapters are pretty simplistic and that we haven't even scratched the surface as to God's ways.

The chapters have been outlined a number of ways by scholars and the variety is due to the complex interweaving of themes common to Paul's writing style.¹ It's probably best to look at it as Romans 9, Israel past, Romans 10, Israel present and Romans 11, Israel future, but there is some overlap and this doesn't account for Gentiles. It is not easy to outline with precision. It is much easier to summarize the argument by taking the complex of interwoven themes and putting them together in one linear story. That is what we will try to do today. That story in a nutshell is that God's plan for history is defined by the covenants that pointed toward the Messiah and His kingdom. But when the Messiah came and offered the kingdom the nation Israel rejected their Messiah. Therefore the kingdom was postponed and the nation Israel went into a period of partial hardening during which God is showing mercy to Gentiles such that they become partakers of spiritual blessings under Israel's covenants. When the fullness of the Gentiles comes in God will also show mercy to the nation Israel and upon reception of their Messiah they will be restored to their kingdom. So the big story of history is that we are

moving toward God's establishment of a kingdom and a citizenry to rule in that kingdom that is composed of Jews and Gentiles who have faith in the Jewish Messiah. That much is known but the details of how it takes place are beyond human comprehension.

Romans 8:38-39 sets the occasion for Romans 9-11. In Romans 8:38-39 Paul concluded with a strong statement to the effect that God is able to keep us saved forever. But how can we trust that God will keep us saved forever if He was unable to keep Israel from falling from her covenant position? Romans 9-11 is written to answer that most important question. Has Israel fallen from her covenant position? Because with so much Gentile salvation it appears that Israel has fallen from her covenant position. And if that is so then there is something or someone that is stronger than God and can cause His promises to fail. Paul is writing to refute that idea. There is no-thing and no-one who is stronger than God. The answer is not that Israel has fallen forever but that God has a plan for history that involves successive dispensing of mercy, first to Israel who spurned it by rejecting their Messiah, then to Gentiles who received the Messiah and then finally once more to Israel when they receive their Messiah. So while it appears that Israel has fallen from their covenant position they have not, but rather God has a plan that is bigger than Israel that incorporates Gentiles. Thus there are three facets that we must evaluate Paul's argument under and these are the past, the present and the future. By the past we refer to the period from Abraham to the Cross, by the present we refer to the period from the Cross until the Rapture and by Future we refer to the period from the Rapture to the Kingdom.

We begin with the past, from Abraham to the Cross. Paul takes us back in Romans 9 deep into the past when God made the original covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the great advantages that were given to that covenant nation above and beyond the original covenant. These were all given of God's mercy. In 9:6 Paul explains that not all are spiritual Israel who are physically descended from Israel. In other words, only the Israelite who had faith like the man Israel is the true descendant that will enjoy the fulfillment of the covenant promises. In 9:7-9 he explains that being a physical descendant of Abraham was not sufficient to enjoy the fulfillment of the covenant promises because it was only through the supernatural child of promise, Isaac, that the spiritual descendants would be named. In 9:10-13 he further explains that the spiritual descendants were not chosen on the basis of works but as a result of Him who calls and the response of faith. In 9:14-18 Paul shows that Israel, as represented by Moses, was enjoying God's mercy, whereas Gentile nations, as represented by Pharaoh, were not enjoying God's mercy at that time. And that if they cursed Israel they would be cursed. There's really nothing more in the text than this argument. Paul is laying out the fact that at that time in history God was showing mercy to Israel through the covenant and that He was not showing mercy to Gentiles but rather letting them go their own way and if they cursed His covenant people He would damage them for they were touching the apple of His eye. That explains the Exodus. Then in 9:4-5 Paul mentions other great gifts of mercy that God lavished on the nation Israel; the adoption as sons, Israel was His only son, and the glory, referring to the Shekinah Glory which was a physical reminder of the presence of God with Israel, and the covenants which refers to the grace covenants made with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve tribes and David, and the giving of the Law, which refers

to the Mosaic Covenant, and the temple service, which referred to the priestly system of sacrifices and worship, and the promises, which are the Messianic promises, whose are the fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever, the greatest blessing of all. And all this is not to mention 3:1-2 where He entrusted the Scriptures to them. So all these gifts given to Israel were the mercies of God to Israel and that is Paul's argument and that is really all of Paul's argument.

Now, in 9:19-29 when the Messiah came to the nation Israel you have the Potter, who is God, and the clay, which is always the nation Israel and God the Potter took the nation Israel made of clay and divided it into two portions, one portion He molded into a vessel for honorable use because they responded to His mercy in the covenants and everything we just mentioned by believing in the Messiah just as God had desired, but the other portion was molded into a vessel for common use because they rejected His many mercies extended to them as evidenced by their stumbling over the Messiah and rejection of Him.

Why then did this large portion of the nation Israel stumble and reject? Paul gives many reasons, both the wrong reasons and the right reasons and the right reasons are all related. Why Israel stumbled and rejected has many answers, it's not one simple answer, it's a multi-faceted answer. In 10:18, it is taught that it was not because they did not hear the gospel because they most certainly did hear the gospel. When Messiah came the gospel went throughout the entire land of Israel. They most definitely heard. Lack of hearing then is not the reason they rejected. In 10:19, it was not because they did not comprehend the gospel because they most definitely did comprehend the gospel. At least they should have because the OT texts written by Moses explained it and so they should have understood. So lack of comprehending what was coming was not a valid excuse because they had the OT Scriptures. In 10:21 it is stated that the reason they stumbled and rejected their Messiah was because they were a disobedient and obstinate people. They were like a child that never grew to maturity. They yelled and kicked and screamed against God. They threw a big temper tantrum and so when Messiah came they were in a state of spiritual blindness, or at least we must say that they could not see well. In 10:2 it is stated that they had a zeal for God but their zeal was not in accordance with knowledge. It was misguided zeal. In 10:3 they did not know about God's righteousness, here they were ignorant and obviously they were ignorant of the Law because the Law revealed God's righteousness. But being ignorant of God's righteousness they sought to establish their own righteousness. They were trying to get righteousness with God by works. Then in 9:31-32 it is stated explicitly that the reason they stumbled was because they pursued righteousness by works and righteousness is not attained by works but by faith. We may say then that the large portion of the covenant nation spurned the mercies of God in that they did not attain to the intended aim which 10:4 says was to believe in the Messiah. Consequently they prepared themselves for destruction and God simply took those who prepared themselves for this utter end and molded them into a common vessel in His purposes. But God took the portion that believed in the Messiah and He molded them into an honorable vessel and outfitted them for glory in the kingdom to come. So this remnant of believing Israel remained in the wake of the cross and that remnant continues until this present time and we may say as 9:29 says that the only reason God does not

destroy the entire nation of Israel is because there is always a remnant, otherwise Paul says they would have become like Sodom and would have resembled Gomorrah.

Now we come to the present, and this takes us from the Cross to the Rapture. In the present 11:1-10 shows that God has a remnant of believing Jews who did come to God on the basis of grace and not by works and therefore they attained the choice position with God. But as for the rest, those who did not avail themselves of the mercies of God, they were hardened. And 11:25 shows that this partial hardening of the nation Israel will remain during this present age. 11:11, 12 and 15 all show that God used the portion of the nation Israel that rejected their Messiah in order to extend the riches of His mercy to Gentiles so that they would have a time of salvation. 9:24 showed that in the wake of the cross Gentiles did respond by faith to His call. 9:30 explains that this occurred because Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith. So then Gentiles came to God the right way and this is to be viewed as a strange thing since this was to be expected of the Jews but they did not, and now the Gentiles who were not enjoying the mercy of God now sought the mercy of God and found it. So we discover that in the present God is showing mercy to Gentiles and the age is characterized by Gentile salvation in the main but there is always a remnant of believing Jews and this is to signify as 11:1 shows, that God has not rejected His nation Israel. The purpose of Gentile salvation is stated in 11:11 to provoke the Jews to jealousy and this is again taught in 11:14. In 11:13 Paul magnifies his ministry to the Gentiles because as more and more Gentiles come to faith in the Jewish Messiah then more and more Gentiles can provoke his own countrymen to come to faith in the same Jewish Messiah. In 11:17 the Gentiles are now partaking of spiritual blessings that come from the Abrahamic Covenant since we are attached to the Messiah promised in that covenant. In other words, as 11:18 says, it is not we Gentiles that support the Abrahamic Covenant, but the Abrahamic Covenant that supports us. So we were grafted into the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant but it is still Israel's covenant and they are the natural recipients of its blessings. And we should not get arrogant because in 11:21, if He did not spare them for not availing themselves of His mercies in that covenant then He will not spare us either. In 11:22 we learn that God shows both kindness and severity, both mercy and judgment and that He is always revealing both at the same time, but to Jews one and Gentiles the other in successive dispensational arrangements of world history. And at the present it is mercy to the Gentiles and judgment of hardening on the Jews. But 11:25 says that the partial hardening of Israel will only continue until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

Then 11:26 takes us immediately to the future, which is from the Rapture to the Kingdom and Paul goes to that end in this verse, and all Israel will be saved. Israel will be shown mercy again. But 10:14-15 already predicted that the means by which all Israel will be saved is that first a proclaimer must be sent, and second, that proclaimer must preach, and third, the nation must hear and fourth the nation must believe and fifth the nation will call on Him to be saved and 11:26 is saying that the Messiah will come from heavenly Zion and remove all ungodliness from the nation Israel. 11:27 says this is the fulfilment of the new covenant when He takes away the nation Israel's sins.

And so it is quite clear from all of this that 11:28-32 is nothing more than a grand summation of God's plan for history as already expounded in the previous chapters because they show what is said here, that God's purpose with history is to reveal His mercy to all men and that the way He has done this is by alternating His dispensing of mercy to Jews and Gentiles in successive epochs of history.

Now because this is only the tip of the iceberg as to God's ways Paul bursts forth in 11:33 with a doxology. A. T. Robertson says, "Some of God's tracks he has left plain to us, but others are beyond us." It is for those things that are beyond us, that have not been revealed in these chapters, that Paul gives praise to God. Witmer says, "God has revealed some of...His paths ("ways") so that people may know them, but it is humanly impossible to exhaust them." Paul feels tiny knowing what he taught in Romans 9-11. There is so much more, infinitely more, to know these chapters is to be but a babe in understanding. To think otherwise is to trample on the great reaches of divine wisdom. Nobody knows how to search out how God has done all this or why God has done all this in His way according to His own perfect counsel. In 11:33, **Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!** The original Greek is much better. Paul says, "Oh the depth of the riches, oh the depth of the wisdom and oh the depth of the knowledge of God." There is one depth of God expressed in three realms, of riches, of wisdom and of knowledge. The word **depth** refers to a great "abyss," a bottomless pit, and points to the immeasurable and incomprehensible God. Paul highlights this incomprehensibility of God with respect to three things. First, the depth of His **riches**. The Greek word is singular and should be translated "wealth." When viewed as singular it is a net sum. In this context He dispenses mercy to both Jews and Gentiles out of His immense sum of wealth. He dispenses His mercy to each group in successive ages of world history. As such both people groups on the planet have opportunity to respond to His mercy. Second, the depth of His **wisdom**. The word refers to skill in arranging and implementing. When viewed singularly it refers to the net sum of His skills. In this context His wisdom refers to His ability to arrange a history that results in the availability of salvation to both Jew and Gentile in successive stages of history. No one except God has sufficient wisdom to arrange a plan that governed Israel and all nations in a succession of time alternating between dispensing of mercy and hardening so that all were shut up in a period of disobedience and could only give credit to God. Third, the depths of His **knowledge**. The word in the singular refers to His intellect and comprehension. Obviously to arrange such a plan for history as well as implement it reveals an infinite intellect. We can only see the broad outlines through what is revealed but He knows every intimate detail.

Paul now uses two Greek words that forever capture His incomprehensibility; **How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways**. The word **judgments** is *κριμα* and should here be translated "decisions." Paul means that the course history takes is a result of His decisions, not ours. God alone is in charge of the course of history. Paul says **How unsearchable are His decisions** regarding history. The Greek word **unsearchable** is used only here and it means "not able to be searched out." No one could set out on an expedition to search out God's decisions for history and discover them. We can know the broad outlines but we cannot search out all the details. They are beyond all human comprehension because God Himself is beyond

comprehension. Second, Paul says, **How...unfathomable His ways!** The Greek word **ways** is *οδος* and means "paths." In the Greek **paths** refers to ways of acting or conducting one's self. God's ways of conducting Himself are **unfathomable**. The Greek word **unfathomable** means "not able to trace or track out." It comes from tracking an animal by following the footprints and other evidences of movement. It is used only here and in Eph 3:8. In Eph 3:8 it is used of the unfathomable wealth of Christ. That is something that cannot be tracked out. Here it is used of God's ways of conducting Himself. They are **unfathomable** meaning they cannot be tracked out even by the most brilliant of humans or the collective brilliance of humans. All the genius in the world combined past, present and future of all minds cannot together track out the ways of God so as to discover them. They are beyond human comprehension because God by definition is beyond comprehension.

Here in several words we have the doctrine of incomprehensibility and when we think about this doctrine we think of it in terms of the Creator-creature distinction. The diagram of the Creator-creature distinction is a very profound diagram. It means there are basically two levels of being or two levels of existence or reality. That there is not just one level of existence or being so that the difference between the Creator and the creature only differs by degree. No, the difference between the Creator and the creature is one of kind and therefore the Creator and His ways cannot be captured in terms of any created thing; we cannot capture Him by anything created such as human logic and reason. But if that's the case how can we know the Creator? If all we have at our disposal as far as thinking and speaking is created then how can we know anything about the Creator? The answer is by analogy or correspondence. The only way we can know God is by analogy. Take for example human thought and human language which expresses human thought. Human thought and language are creations of God and yet when God created the universe He condescended to use human language in order to create. He then spoke to man in human language so that we could know what He was like by analogy. All the knowledge of God that humans can have is by analogy. What this means is that we can say things about God, for example, that God is omniscient, and we can define that as God knowing all things actual and possible, but we don't have anything in creation that is like that so we can only have a concept of it from the fact that we can know things, though that knowledge is limited. And we move from the fact that we can know to the fact that God knows all things. Or really we move from the fact that He knows all things to the explanation for why we know some things. His knowledge is prior, always prior. Or we can say that God is love and because God is love we can have love, and our concept of love is analogous to God's love, but it does not exhaust His love. Our love only gives us a point of contact with God's love so that we have a true comprehension that God is love but we do not have an exhaustive comprehension that God is love. In other words, we know God is love but we only know that in part, we do not know that exhaustively, for to know Him exhaustively we must become Him. And no creature becomes the Creator for it would introduce an essential change in Him and He never changes. So we say under the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God that He is knowable by analogy and this knowledge by analogy is sufficient to know Him truly although not exhaustively.

Now in 11:34 and 35 Paul quotes two OT passages and we should clarify that these verses and verse 36 are not general but relate to what has come before and what comes before in Rom 9-11 is an explication of God's plan for history. We may generalize it but Paul specializes it with respect to how God constructed human history, the way that He constructed it. In this construction did God consider man, what man thought or what man would do or any such thing like that? The short answer is no but that is what Paul is addressing. In 11:34 he loosely quotes Isa 40:13. The Isaiah 40's are great for a big view of God. So if you are ever struggling with why things are the way they are then go read the Isaiah 40's and you'll be able to relax. Isaiah said, **For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR?** So two questions here. First, **who has known the mind of the Lord?** Well, no one because God's mind is incomprehensible and we are just creatures. So we can know His mind in part, insofar as He has revealed what He is thinking. But no one has known God's mind exhaustively. When we contemplate the mind of God we say that God is omniscient and we describe that as saying that God knows all things actual and possible, even the what-if's of history. And in this context that is a fully sufficient explanation because the plan of God for history is what is on Paul's mind. And no creature has ever known or even begun to know God's mind on all subjects particular, actual, possible, et. al...that are forever and at once a part of His thinking. Second question, **who became His counselor?** Well, again, no one because God doesn't need your counsel. God isn't looking for advice on how to arrange or implement His plan. Some people think He should have asked for their advice and some people give them their thoughts every once in a while. To do that is the epitome of arrogance and idiocy. To think that God needs to counsel with us is to say that we know more than Him and He does not know what He is doing. But He never asked or will ask anyone's advice because He already knows everything and so you and I have nothing to offer. You couldn't tell Him one thing He doesn't know and you will never be able to tell Him anything new because He already knows everything before He created the universe. So **who became His counselor?** No one.

In 11:35 he asks the third question, this one a quote from Job 41:11, some more great chapters about God, **Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN?** This refers to human merit with respect to God's plan for history. Whoever gave something to God that obligated God to repay them, to do something special for them? Nobody. God doesn't give you or me good things because you or I did a good thing for Him. That is meritorious thinking and that is not the way of God. God did not take what you or I would do into consideration in constructing His plan for history. Instead, what God did in verse 32 is shut up everyone in disobedience so that there could be no basis in anything we did for Him to do anything. And then on the basis of His own character He would show us mercy! Mercy is not giving someone what they deserve. If God gave us what we deserved, what we merited, He would give us punishment. But God constructed history on the basis of His own character and not our character. Nobody ever gave to God first so that God might be obligated to pay that person back. What we do have to give God is not sufficient. We owe God but we can't pay the price and so God gave to us His only begotten Son to pay the price that we owed so that He could extend mercy to us sinners

who deserve nothing but punishment. So then God's plan is beyond man's knowing, without man's counseling and apart from man's merit.

In 11:36 Paul explains, **For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.** Simply put, God is the source of all things in history, He is the sustainer of all things in history and He is the goal of all things in history. History begins, progresses and ends with God that He might be all in all. Alford said this is "The sublimest apostrophe existing even in the pages of inspiration itself." And Constable said, "The primary focus of the doxology is God's great plan of salvation through history." Paul concludes with an ascription of glory. **To Him be the glory forever. Amen.** The Greek word **glory** refers to one's reputation or radiance and is perceived on the basis of performance. God's performance in history is the most excellent and therefore **To Him be the glory forever.** The Greek **forever** is literally translated "into the ages." God's reputation will be continually remembered as the most excellent into the ages. Paul concludes with the word **Amen** which is a Hebrew word transliterated into the Greek and a Greek word transliterated into the English and means "truly, or so be it."

We have now concluded the doctrinal portion of the epistle, chapters 1-11, and next week we will begin the application portion, chapters 12-16.

¹ The most prominent outline of the chapters is to say that Romans 9 is Israel past, Romans 10 is Israel present and Romans 11 is Israel future. But if you look at the chapters you actually find Israel past and present in Romans 9 and Israel present and future in Romans 10 and Israel present and future in Romans 11. So while that outline is nice and tidy it's not exactly correct though the general movement from past to present to future does seem correct. It might be better to say that Romans 9 is Israel's election, Romans 10 is Israel's rejection and Romans 11 is Israel's reception. That's about as good as it gets but it still doesn't account for Gentiles. In fact neither scheme accounts for Gentiles. One wonders whether he should even try to outline it.