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UNDERSTANDING GOD'S PROPHETIC REVELATION

Romans 11:25-27

By

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Romans Lesson 71

Understanding God's Prophetic Revelation Romans 11:25-27

I spent the summer of 1969 with some other seminary students in a work/study/mentoring situation with Bill Counts and Hal Lindsey at the "Jesus Christ Light & Power House" in West Los Angeles. Hal was busy writing his book on prophecy, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. He would come to our meetings and beg us to go to Christian bookstores and ask them to order that book. He was afraid that it wouldn't sell. As it turned out, it sold over 15 million copies and was the best selling book of the decade!

If you want to write a best seller, write it on prophecy! If you want to pack out a church, put on a prophecy conference. For some strange reason that I haven't quite figured out, Christians and non-Christians alike are drawn to the subject of biblical prophecy. Will Christians go through the tribulation? Who is the anti-Christ? What will trigger Armageddon? Does Israel have a divine right to the land? Will they tear down the Dome of the Rock Mosque and rebuild the Temple? What about the Palestinians? Just this week the Israeli Prime Minister met with our President to discuss whether Israel should launch an attack on Iran before Iran perfects a nuclear weapon that could annihilate Israel.

While these issues are fascinating to speculate about, they usually end up with people walking away no different than they were before. But by way of contrast, biblical prophecy is always given for some practical effect. It calls sinners to repent before the coming judgment. It comforts believers with God's sovereignty over world events, including persecution. It exhorts believers to holiness. And, in the case of our text, it is aimed at curbing our pride: Paul writes "so that you will not be wise in your own estimation" (11:25).

As we have seen, in Romans 11:1-10, Paul shows that God's rejection of Israel was partial, not total. There was a remnant according to God's gracious choice. In 11:11-32, he shows that God's rejection of Israel was temporary, not permanent. God will again restore the Jews as a nation and pour out His covenant blessings on them.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: To God's Glory* [Banner of Truth], pp. 161-162) observes that Paul gives five arguments (in 11:1-24) that God is not finished with the Jews. First, in 11:1, Paul says that he himself is proof: He is a Jew whom God has saved. Second (11:2-6), Paul shows that God has preserved a remnant of saved Jews. Third (11:16), he uses two parallel illustrations to show that because of God's promises to the patriarchs, He will bless their descendants. Fourth (11:23), he argues that God is able to graft the Jews back into the olive tree. Fifth (11:24), he argues that what God has done with the Gentiles proves that He is able to do it in the case of the Jews. I would add a sixth argument from 11:12 & 15: If Israel's failure led to the outpouring of blessing on the Gentiles, how much greater blessing will result from their salvation that God has promised?

But now Paul ends his arguments and makes a prophetic revelation. God has revealed something to Paul regarding the future of the Gentiles and Jews and he wants us to understand it so that we will grow in humility:

Understanding God's prophetic revelation of salvation history
should curb our pride as we realize
His sovereign plan and power.

Paul's opening phrase, "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed," is one that he uses frequently (Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:13) to introduce something that his readers may not know, but which Paul regards as important (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 61-62). "For" tells us that Paul is explaining what he has said earlier with regard to Israel's rejection not being permanent. He calls this information a *mystery*. This teaches us that...

1. The matters we are dealing with here are prophetic revelation, not theological speculation.

"Mystery" does not refer to some puzzle where we have to use our reason to piece together the clues to figure out what's going on. And contrary to the "mystery religions" of Paul's day (or the Freemasons of our day), it does not refer to secret knowledge that only the initiated inner circle can know. Rather, it means something that has been concealed and is unknowable by human reason,

but which God has now revealed. Paul uses the word elsewhere to refer to various aspects of the Christian faith, but especially to the gospel and its inclusion of the Gentiles (Eph. 3:4-9; 6:19). Certainly the gospel of justification by faith alone was revealed in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen. 15:6; cf. Rom. 4:3) and the fact that the Gentiles would be included was stated there (e.g., Isa. 11:10; 19:19-25; 42:1-4; cf. Matt. 12:18-21; Rom. 15:9-12). But these truths could not be seen with clarity until Christ brought them into focus.

Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], p. 614) outlines three elements of the mystery in Romans 11:25: (1) Part of Israel is hardened for a limited period of time; (2) the salvation of the Gentiles will precede the salvation of Israel; and (3) all Israel will eventually be saved. Paul may have understood these truths through meditating on the Old Testament in light of the gospel. But the word *mystery* indicates that God imparted special revelation to Paul on these matters, especially on the truth that Israel would go through a time of judicial hardening while the Gentiles came to salvation. Then the hardening would be lifted and “all Israel will be saved” (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 715-717).

The point is that we cannot arrive at some of these profound biblical truths through human reason alone, and therefore we cannot boast in our knowledge of them. God had to reveal these truths to Paul, who conveyed them to us. Otherwise we could not have understood them. And sometimes, as in the next point that we’re going to consider, we have to set aside our logical objections to the truth and recognize that God has spoken. We can either proudly argue with His revelation or humbly submit to it.

2. The prophetic revelation concerns God’s sovereign, powerful working in salvation history.

As we have seen, Romans 9 emphasizes God’s sovereignty in showing mercy to whom He wills and hardening whom He wills. Romans 10 emphasizes human responsibility. “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (10:13), but Israel stubbornly refused to believe (10:21). In Romans 11:20-23a, the emphasis is on human responsibility to believe in Christ and to persevere. But from 11:23b-29, the emphasis is on God’s sovereignty. He is able to graft Israel in again (11:23-24). He has hardened Israel for a time during which He is bringing the full number of Gentiles

to salvation (11:25). But after that time, He will lift the hardening on Israel and bring their full number to salvation. He will do this by sending the Deliverer, removing ungodliness from Jacob, and fulfilling His covenant to take away their sins (11:26-27). While the Jews were currently God's enemies so that the Gentiles could come to salvation, at the same time God loved them because of His choice and His promise to the fathers (11:28). You can count on this because God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (11:29).

So while affirming human responsibility to repent and believe, Paul at the same time shows that God is in charge of salvation history, hardening some nations for a period of time while He works with others, and then reversing the process. These are God's unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways that cause Paul to burst out in praise (11:33). But let's unpack this in more detail:

- A. God is powerful to harden nations and to lift that hardening, according to His sovereign purposes.

Paul says (11:25), "that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." We saw this in 11:7-10. Paul also refers to it in 2 Corinthians 3:14-15, where Paul says in reference to the Jews, "But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart." Jesus referred to the same spiritual hardening or blindness in Matthew 13:13-16 with reference to His parables. It was a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (6:10), "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed." It was God's sovereign judicial hardening of people in their disobedience and unbelief.

This is hard truth! God has the right to show mercy to whom He desires and to harden whom He desires (Rom. 9:18). If we cry, "That's not fair!" we are contending with the Divine Potter, who has the right to make vessels for honorable or common use as He determines (Rom. 9:20-21). If God were fair, everyone would be condemned because all are guilty before Him. God is not required to show mercy to all. We can either rail against God for what we think is unfair or we can submit to God as the sovereign who has

the power to harden or to show mercy. You will not understand the doctrine of election until you bow before God and yield all of your rights to Him, recognizing that if He dealt with you on the basis of fairness, you would be eternally condemned.

The staggering thing about what Paul says here is that for about 2,000 years now, the Jews have for the most part been hardened against the gospel because their ancestors cried out (Matt. 27:25), "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" Not all were hardened, in that there has always been a remnant of saved Jews according to God's gracious choice (Rom. 11:5). And the hardening is "partial" in that eventually, it will be lifted. But be careful! If you say, "It's not fair that a Jewish boy or girl living hundreds of years after Christ should be hardened because of the sins of their distant ancestors," you have just charged God with unfairness! Those who make such a charge do not understand God's sovereign right to be God or the utter sinfulness of all people in His holy presence.

That's the negative side of God's sovereign, powerful working in salvation history. But, thankfully, there is a positive side:

- B. The future salvation of Israel is not just a possibility, but a certainty, because God has decreed it.

Paul is not expressing a holy wish, "I hope that someday all Israel will be saved," but rather a prophetic certainty: "All Israel will be saved." But there is a lot of controversy over the meaning of the text here that we need to sort out.

First, the Greek phrase translated "and so" can be interpreted in several ways. Without going through all of them, the most likely meaning is, "in this manner." The idea is, "In the same manner that God has hardened Israel while He brought the Gentiles to salvation (described in 11:11-24), so once the full number of Gentiles has been saved, God will use that to provoke the Jews to jealousy so that they will be saved" (Moo, p. 720). As God sovereignly orchestrates the fullness of the Gentiles, so He will do with the Jews (see 11:12, 15).

But there is also controversy over the phrase "all Israel." Many early church fathers and later the Reformers and their followers argued that "all Israel" refers to all of God's elect through-

out history, both Jews and Gentiles. But in Romans 9-11 Paul uses "Israel" ten times and every use refers to ethnic Israel (Moo, p. 721). The context of these chapters deals with the question of why the Jews were not coming to Christ while the Gentiles were. And clearly "Israel" in 11:25 and "they" in 11:28 both refer to the Jews in contrast to the Gentiles. So it is unlikely that Paul would change his meaning in 11:26.

Another view is that "all Israel" refers to the elect within Israel (as in 9:6). The meaning would then be that eventually the full number of the elect Jews will come to salvation. But this is stating the obvious. And, this would require a shift in meaning between 11:25, where "Israel" refers to the nation generally, to a more narrow meaning in 11:26. Also, it is hard to understand how the completion of the number of elect Jews will be seen as a dramatic event referred to as "life from the dead" (11:15). And so the best meaning is that "all Israel" means the nation in general.

But what does "all" mean? Most commentators agree that it does not mean every single Jew who has ever lived, nor every Jew living in the end times when the hardness is lifted. The phrase "all Israel" is used often in the Old Testament to refer to most of the nation, but not to every single Jew in the nation (Josh. 7:25; 1 Sam. 7:5; 2 Sam. 16:22; 1 Kings 12:1; 2 Chron. 12:1; Dan. 9:11; see Moo, p. 722, note 55). So Paul's meaning for "all Israel will be saved" is that after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, God will lift the judicial hardening and the great majority of Jews living at that time will turn to Christ with saving faith.

And the point is that it is not that God looked down through time and saw that the Jews would believe of their own free will, and so He told Paul how things would turn out. Rather, things will turn out this way because God decreed that they will turn out this way. He is sovereignly, powerfully working in salvation history for His own purposes and glory.

- C. The future salvation of Israel includes the coming of the Deliverer, the removal of ungodliness, and the forgiveness of sins, in accord with God's covenant.

Briefly note five things:

- (1) Israel and the Gentiles are saved in the same way, through faith in Christ the Deliverer.

Some wrongly teach that there are two ways of salvation, one for the Gentiles and another for the Jews. But there has always been only one way of salvation, namely, to trust in God's provision of a Savior or Deliverer, who is Jesus Christ the Lord. In the Old Testament, the Jews looked forward to the final and perfect sacrifice who would bear their sins. We look back to Christ as the Lamb of God. But both Jews and Gentiles are a part of the same tree, not separate trees. This is not to say that there are no distinctions between Israel and the church, but it is to say that we are all partakers of the same promise of the Savior that God gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3:15) and later to Abraham (Gen. 12, 15, 17).

- (2) The coming of the Deliverer most likely means that all Israel will be saved either just prior to or in connection with the second coming of Christ.

Some argue that verse 26 refers to Christ's first coming, but at that time Jesus did not remove all ungodliness from Jacob and all Israel was not saved. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (pp. 190-191, 232-234) argues that it refers to a spiritual coming of Christ out of His spiritual dwelling place with His people ("Zion") at some time in the future that will result in widespread conversion of the Jews. But most commentators understand this as a reference to either just prior to or at the time of the second coming, when Christ will come out of the heavenly Zion (Schreiner, p. 619).

Zechariah 12:10 predicts, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn." Perhaps even as Paul was converted by seeing the risen Savior, so all Israel will be dramatically converted when the Lord intervenes to save them from national destruction at Armageddon and then appears in glory (Zech. 14:1-4). But we can't be dogmatic on the details of these future events.

- (3) The removal of ungodliness from Jacob reminds us that there is no salvation apart from repentance.

“He will remove ungodliness from Jacob” (from the LXX of Isa. 59:20) is another way of referring to salvation. “Ungodliness” refers to the “unbelief” of 11:23 (Schreiner, p. 620). But to describe salvation as “removing ungodliness” shows, as all Scripture affirms, that saving faith always involves repentance. Granted, it is a life-long process that is never perfected until we are with the Lord. But if we claim to believe in Christ but live in persistent disobedience, one day we will hear Him say the frightening words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

- (4) The forgiveness of sins is the primary need of every person.

Romans 11:27: “This is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.” Paul combines Isaiah 59:21 and 27:9 (see Moo, p. 729). “I take away their sins” reminds us that salvation is not primarily a psychological matter of moving from low self-esteem to proper self-esteem, as Robert Schuller claims. Nor is it a matter of Jesus helping you to succeed in your family life or career. Salvation meets our fundamental need to be reconciled with the holy God through His just forgiveness of all our sins through the death of Christ (Rom. 3:26).

- (5) The forgiveness of our sins is based on God’s covenant provision through Jesus Christ.

Some (Moo, p. 728) argue that Paul is referring here to the Abrahamic covenant. But the language also reminds us of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-44; Morris, p. 422). But the point is, because it is God’s covenant, it is a sure thing. He always keeps His covenant promises (Rom. 11:29). And so Paul’s prophecy shows God’s sovereign, powerful working in salvation history.

But, as I said, God doesn’t give us prophetic revelation so that we can draw up nifty charts of the end times. There is always a practical aspect to it:

3. Prophetic revelation is given to curb our pride and to deepen our burden for the lost, not to stoke curiosity about the future.

Paul gives us this information “so that you will not be wise in your own estimation” (11:25). The Gentiles were prone to think that they were hot stuff because they were saved and to look down

on the unbelieving Jews because they had rejected Christ. We're all prone to think that God saved us because somehow we're a notch above others and He saw something worth saving in us that others lack. But that is to deny God's grace. And, if we look down on other sinners and think that they deserve judgment (forgetting that we deserve it just as much as they do), we will not reach out to them with the gospel. One way to hasten the conversion of the Jews is to finish the task of evangelizing the Gentiles, because when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, God will lift the partial hardening on the Jews and bring them to salvation en masse.

Conclusion

So test your understanding of God's prophetic revelation of salvation history by this: Does this truth humble you as you realize that except for the grace of God, you could have been born at a time when the Gentiles were "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12)? But as Paul goes on to say (Eph. 2:13), "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." God's sovereign working in salvation history should produce humble gratitude in our hearts.

Also, does this truth burden your heart for those who are outside of Christ, whether Jew or Gentile? While God is sovereign over salvation history, as we saw (10:14-15), He uses those whom He has saved to proclaim the good news to those who need to hear it in order to believe. Understanding God's prophetic revelation should motivate us to proclaim to all that "the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him" (10:12).

Application Questions

1. Why is biblical prophecy such a popular topic? How must we be careful so that we don't misuse it?
2. How does biblical prophecy confirm God's sovereignty in salvation? Does this rob people of the responsibility to believe?
3. Discuss: Is God unfair to keep the Jews in spiritual hardening for 2,000 years even though most of them had nothing to do with crucifying Jesus Christ?
4. Specifically, how does the truth of God's sovereign working in salvation history curb our pride?

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