



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Following the Unsearchable God

Romans 11.25–36

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Introduction

In late October 1941, Western civilization found itself either under the oppression of Germany or holding on for dear life to keep from being overrun by the German blitz. Pearl Harbor would not be bombed for another five and a half weeks. The British had held off the German Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain but remained in great peril. The Soviet Union had stopped the Germans in the east but were not yet able to counterattack. Despair was the common mood, but Winston Churchill refused to yield to it. He kept using his oratorical gift to stir the British nation and the western world at large. On October 29, 1941, in a speech at Harrow, the school he had once attended, he stirred his audience with these words:

Do not let us speak of darker days. Let us rather speak of sterner days. These are not dark days: these are great days—the greatest days our country has ever lived. And we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race (in Johnson 2009, 122).

As we continue in the spiritual war in which we are engaged (cf. 2 Cor 10.3–6), more is at stake than there was in World War II, though we certainly understand the temptation to despair over all “the sin that clings so closely” (Heb 12.1). We need encouragement to press on in our work of ministry, remembering that “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4.4). In our text, which is one of the most theologically packed in Scripture, Paul encourages his readers to remember that God, although often “unsearchable” (Rom 11.33), keeps his promises and aims to complete his purpose.

The Context

People of faith correctly love Paul’s epistle to the Romans in which he explains the good news that is “the power of God for salvation” for both Jews and Greeks (Rom 1.16). He shows how the gospel fulfills the Mosaic Law and the Prophets (cf. 3.21; 10.4), an argument that leads to an important question: Why had so many Israelites rejected it and so many Gentiles received it?

Paul acknowledged that question in his qualifying statement in 9.6a: “But it is not as though the word of God has failed.” Chapters 9 — 11 give a more elaborate response in an argument which he develops around three questions:

- “Is there injustice on God’s part?” (9.14)
- “Has God rejected his people?” (11.1)
- “Did [Israel] stumble in order that they might fall?” (11.11).

God’s Purpose Will Be Completed

Each of those questions is answered with an emphatic, “by no means!” (μη γένοιτο, *mē genoito*).

- Israel *is* special, as shown by the fact that to them belonged “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises,” as well as “the patriarchs.” Furthermore, it was “from their race, according to the flesh,” that “the Christ, who is God over all,” had come (9.4–5).
- In Christ, God had completed his plan (10.4, see NIV 2011), showing mercy (11.32) and completing his purpose despite hardhearted resistance (cf. 9.14 — 10.21).
- Indeed, throughout history, God had always saved a faithful remnant through whom he advanced to complete his ultimate purpose (cf. 9.27–28; 11.1–6).

The different responses to Christ by Israel and the Gentiles continued the pattern. If Israel “failed to obtain what it was seeking ... the elect obtained it...” (11.7). Furthermore, through the “trespass” of those who failed to obtain it, “salvation has come to the Gentiles” (11.11). In fact, Paul said, “the partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written [in Isaiah 59.20–21]” (11.25–27).

How that can be still puzzles us; Paul answers, “As regards the gospel, [the Israelites] are enemies of God for [the Gentiles’] sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers” (11.28). In addition, just as Gentiles, though once disobedient, had received mercy because of Israel’s disobedience, so Israel, now disobedient, will someday receive the mercy shown to the Gentiles (11:30-31).

How does that work? Paul doesn’t really answer, and we wish he had said more. But he does assure us that “God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (11.32). How can we be sure? He answers, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11.29). The confidence he expresses is grounded in God’s nature.

Always Trust God

Ultimately, we must trust God whose “thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways” (Isa 55.8). Paul calls us to such trust even as he reminds us of God’s unfathomable depths.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11.33–36).

God's wisdom and knowledge reach depths we cannot comprehend (11.33). His judgments are unsearchable, his ways inscrutable (11.33). Paul's citations of Isaiah 40.13 and Job 41.11 show us that it's always been so (11.34–35). We are to trust that God knows his business and give him the glory (11.36).

These statements lead us into depths that can swallow up even our deepest thoughts. But we need to read, re-read, think about them, and then ponder them some more. Like many in history, we are tempted to “shrink” God to a size we can understand, if not control. The problem is that if we have a God small enough to understand and/or control, we also have a God who is too small to trust for ultimate concerns.

One manifestation of the temptation to have God conform to our understanding, whether because our language is ambiguous or we are not accounting for some realities about ourselves or him, is found in the seizing on particular, and often exceptional, cases to draw universal conclusions that result in us claiming things about God that are odds with both his nature and ours. While acknowledging that God will work things out according to his purpose—this text and others in Romans and elsewhere affirm as much—we've heard statements about God's control over life's events that attributed things that run counter to other things we are told about him (cf. Hab 1.13; Jas 1.13).

A better approach is to temper our statements about God with what we know about our natures and how God completes his purpose. We all have freedom of choice and can plan what we will or will not do—even if what we will do is reject God (cf. Rom 1.24, 26, 28; and the discussion of Israel's rejection above). But as the crucifixion–resurrection–exaltation of Jesus shows, God can still realize his purpose even when people plan and do the most despicable things. But he does not do so at the expense of our free wills. The dilemma about Israel's rejection illustrates this. Somehow, and again Paul does not say as much as we would like, Israel will ultimately receive God's mercy (Rom 11.30–32). How this will occur is found only in God's unsearchable wisdom and knowledge. Thus it is that, in Romans 11.25–36, Paul points to a bigger reality, to God's power working to keep his promise as he brings about his grand, eternal purpose.

How important is it for us to have that perspective as we serve him, especially in perilous times? His purpose encompasses something bigger than any or all of us. And it is a purpose in which we can participate. How exciting is that?!!! Are there challenges? Obstacles? Resistance? Hardhearted people who are at odds with God's purpose? Absolutely. But God has always been able to overcome those kinds of obstacles, and he will do so again.

Conclusion

Recalling that chapter breaks in Scripture are arbitrary, we need to be reminded what our response to this big view of God should be, taken from the words immediately following Romans 11.33–36.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12.1-2).

That appeal is based on the mercies of God that are at the heart of Paul’s argument in chapters 9 — 11. It’s a call to sacrificial service, as holy and special as Israel’s ancient worship rituals. It’s also a call to resist the pull of the world in favor of transforming renewal from God.

When we accept the challenge, we do so even though we do not always understand how our unsearchable God can work through the obstacles to realize his ultimate purpose. But we have confidence he always will because he always has.

The only question that remains is whether we will make that response of trust. Will we submit to his glorious purpose and enter newness of life (Rom. 6.3–4)? Will we continue to grow in trust, submission, and service?

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Works Cited

Paul Johnson. 2009. *Churchill*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.