

Our Great and Glorious God

by Ray C. Stedman

In the eleventh chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul is tracing for us a very strange connection between a largely Gentile church and the nation of Israel. Through the centuries many have wondered about the tie between these two remarkable peoples – the church of God, which is made up now largely of Gentile believers, although there are Jews among us – and the Jewish nation, that strange nation which now occupies a prominent place on the stage of the world.

As you know, there is no nation today quite like Israel. It attracts worldwide attention when anything happens to it – attention that is way out of proportion to its size and its power. Let something occur in Jerusalem, or anywhere in Israel, and it is blazoned across headlines around the world. The eyes of the world are on this strange nation of the Jews. And Jews, as a people, constitute a strange, unusual power bloc in any country in which they are found today. Someone has suggested that it might be well for the United States to guarantee the permanent possession of Jerusalem to the Jews if they will agree to give New York and Miami back to us. Surely there is no nation quite like the nation of the Jews.

In Chapter 11 the apostle is dealing with this remarkable people, and twice he asks the question, “Has God forgotten his people?” Will God forget this people because of their rejection of Messiah? Has he turned his back on them? Twice he answers the question, “No, never. God has not forgotten his people.”

In the first part of this chapter Paul gives us five reasons why it is evident that God has not forgotten his people the Jews.

- The first one (and one of the reasons why God has turned to the Gentiles and is saving men and women from among the Gentiles) is that he desires to arouse Israel to jealousy. God is reaching Gentiles because, ultimately, he wants to reach Jews.
- Second, Paul says the promises of worldwide blessing that fill so many prophetic passages of the Old Testament hinge upon the restoration of Israel to God. Worldwide blessing can never come until Israel is back in right relationship with its God.
- Third, he says that if the first Jews (the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob) could be made holy by God, then God is able to make Jews holy after thousands of years have passed. Therefore there is hope for Israel.
- In Paul’s fourth argument he uses the figure of an olive tree. The natural branches of the tree are broken off and unnatural branches are grafted on. He points out that even the Gentiles, when they do become believers, become spiritual Israelites. When a Jew becomes a Christian, he doesn’t change his spiritual heritage at all; he fulfills it. Jews who become Christians today are “completed Jews,” but Gentiles who become Christians become spiritual Jews.
- Therefore, Paul argues, not only is that true, but, fifth, if God could do that to the unnatural branches, if he could take a twisted, deformed Gentile and make him into a son of the living

God, how much more can he do this with the natural branches, the Jews.

This brings us to Verse 25 of Chapter 11, where Paul actually **prophesies the restoration that is coming to Israel**. Up to now he has been arguing this from reason, but now he prophesies what this restoration will be like (Verses 25-29):

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

**“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.**

And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.

{Rom 11:25-29 NIV}

Perhaps the striking thing about this passage is that Paul calls the Jews’ present resistance to the gospel a mystery. Now he doesn’t mean that it is obscure and difficult to understand. The word “mystery” does not mean that in Scripture. What it means is that it is something supernatural. It is not caused by natural causes. It cannot be observed by the normal observation of human beings.

I do not know if you have had any occasion to try to witness to a Jew. If you have, perhaps you have run up against what seemed to be a rock wall of indifference and objection and resistance to what you were trying to say. If so, you may well have been experiencing what Paul is talking about here, a strange hardening toward the gospel on the part of the Jews.

When Paul calls this a mystery he means that it is a supernatural phenomenon that has to be revealed to us. You can’t explain it by the normal reasons for resistance to the gospel. It is not because the Jews are inferior in intelligence – they are among the most intelligent of people. Scores of the greatest intellectual leaders of our time have been Jewish in background. So it is not because they are dumb; they are not dumb. And it is not because

they don’t want God; they are among the most religious of all people. In fact, they have been called the most religious people of all time. They want God. Ordinarily you would think they would be open to hearing the good news of how God, in grace, is ready to reach men and change them and indwell them and enrich their lives. And yet those who go among the Jews often find this strange resistance, this anger that is awakened because of the preaching of the gospel. Paul will say more about that later.

First he points out that it has been prophesied that an awakening will come. There will be an awakening. But Paul says three things about this hardness that we must take careful note of:

- a) First, it is a hardening “in part.” That is, not all Jews are afflicted this way. We are not told here how big a part of Israel is going to be hardened – whether 10% or 90%. All we are told is that there are going to be some Jews who simply will not hear, who will not receive the gospel. Whether you are talking to one who is hardened or one who is not is very difficult to determine. It may mean, as it does oftentimes, that the person needs to be witnessed to and loved and reached over a period of time. No one can say that any given person belongs to that hardening. But we can say that there will be, as has been evident in history, a strange, remarkable resistance to the gospel. I have been to Israel five times, and I am always amazed at how resistant the Jews there seem to be to the claims of the Lord Jesus.
- b) Not only does Paul say that this hardening is in part, but it is also limited in time. It is not going to go on forever. A hardening of the heart has happened “until the full number of the Gentiles come in.” So this is not something that they are bound to experience forever. It isn’t something that can be explained by natural causes, and it is not going to last forever.
- c) What does “the full number of the Gentiles” mean? I really do not like that translation. The word the apostle uses is “the fullness of the Gentiles.” We have to ask ourselves, “What does that mean?”

Some, obviously, have interpreted that to mean that a certain number of Gentiles are go-

ing to be converted. God has a certain number in mind and he is going to let the gospel go out to all the world until that number of Gentiles has been converted, and then he will release Israel from its blindness, its hardness. But I don't think this refers to a certain number.

Actually, this is the second time in this chapter where the word *fullness* is used. It is used not only of the Gentiles, as here, but also of the Jews. There is a fullness of Israel mentioned here. In Verse 12, Paul says of Israel, "But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring?" There is the same word, *pleroma*, which means "that which fills." Notice that it is set in direct contrast to the words "their loss" or "their fall." That refers to the time when Israel was driven out of Jerusalem by the armies of the Romans in 70 A.D. and scattered throughout all the nations of the earth.

This does not mean there is a diminished number of Jews. The Jews have increased in number throughout all these centuries of dispersion, so it is not a lower number of Jews that is in view. This is not talking about quantity at all. Paul is talking, rather, about diminished spiritual riches. The Jews have lost the quality and richness of their relationship with God. Though they have the outward trappings of faith and the very books of the Law, still they have lost that richness of relationship that sets the heart aglow and the face radiant with the light and love and beauty and grace and character of God. This is the loss; therefore the *fullness* means "these riches restored."

So, when Paul uses this phrase "the fullness of the Gentiles," he is talking about a Gentile church which is going to become so rich and full in its spiritual riches that it will awaken again the envy of Israel. That is what God has said in this chapter. He turns to the Gentiles in order that he may arouse the Jews to envy. Anyone who reads church history knows that there hasn't been a great deal in Gentile churches that would awaken the Jews to envy! They see among Gentile Christians, for the most part, enemies. Oftentimes the Jews have been oppressed and persecuted and

terribly treated – all in the name of Jesus Christ – by those who profess to be Christians. But if this interpretation is right, and I think it is, it means a very hopeful thing for us. It means that a day is coming when the Gentile churches are going to be enriched with such spiritual blessing that the Jews will say, "We should have that! That's the way we should be!" And the Jews will be open, as never before, to the gospel of the grace of God.

I think we are seeing a taste of this now. This is one reason why Jews, in greater number than ever before since the time of the dispersion, have been open to the gospel and turning to Christ. This is an amazing and encouraging thing. This is what the apostle says must take place.

Paul then says the prophets have told us this is going to happen: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob." That is a promise in the Old Testament prophets. Furthermore, quoting from Jeremiah, he says, "And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins," {cf, Jer 31:33-34}. The deliverer is coming and forgiveness is going to be granted to Israel. That is clearly stated in the gospel.

And so the apostle closes with two important things we ought to remember about the Jews. I don't know if you have Jewish friends and neighbors or not. I have had, and have enjoyed contact with them. But whoever is in touch with Jews today ought to remember these two things from Verses 28-29: "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." God's gifts and his call cannot be taken back.

Now, the Jews may treat you as an enemy. That is due to this strange and supernatural hardening in part that has happened to Israel. This has been the experience of many who have gone as missionaries to the Jews. They have been treated as though they were attacking the Jews instead of trying to minister to them and help them. They have aroused the enmity and anger of the Jews.

Our friends the *Jews for Jesus* have told us how they have gone into Jewish communities to share and talk about their experience as Jews who have found the glory and the grace of God in Jesus

Christ. They have been met with violence and attack upon their persons and enmity against them. I read last week that two thousand Jewish orthodox rabbis held a conference in New York City to determine what to do about the ravages that were being made in the Jewish community by the *Jews for Jesus* movement. The rabbis estimated there must be five thousand *Jews for Jesus* in New York City. The *Jews for Jesus* people say there are only thirty members there – including secretaries. This is the fearsome front that any missionary movement among the Jews seems to create. It causes consternation among Jewish ranks and very grave resentment.

So remember, you may be treated as an enemy. But remember also that the Jews are loved by an unchanging God. God loves every Jew, without exception. No matter how stubborn or resistant they may be, he has set his love upon them. And the nations of the world had better not forget it. God still has chosen the Jews.

Now the apostle moves on to see **God's principle of salvation for all men** in this (Verses 30-32):

Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too, as a result of God's mercy to you, have become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. {Rom 11:30-32 NIV}

That is an amazing statement! In this you see something of how the mind of God works and some of the strange wheels-within-wheels {cf, Ezek 1:16, 10:6-10} with which he moves in current history to bring about his purposes. Paul says that God used the Jews' disobedience, their rejection of their own Messiah, in order to give opportunity to rebellious Gentiles to receive mercy and grace from his hand. In this very letter Paul recounted for us how the gospel went out to the Gentiles only because it had been rejected by the Jews. Paul said that in all the cities he came to, he started first in the synagogues. And he would have stayed there, had the Jews accepted the message. But when they rejected the message, he turned to the Gentiles. And it was only by the Jews' disobedience that the gospel went out to the Gentiles.

That, by the way, answers the question with which this whole section begins. In Chapter 9 Paul raises the question, "Has God failed?" Since he obviously has been trying to reach the Jews and has sent his own Son as their Messiah and they rejected him, does that mean that God has failed? The answer is now clear: No, God has not failed. He used that as a means to reach the Gentile world, which he had intended to reach all along. That was his way of bringing it about.

Then, Paul adds, after having shown mercy to the Gentiles, God now uses the very mercies he has shown to the Gentiles to make the Jews mad and rebellious in order that they, too, can receive mercy. What Paul is saying here is that, unless you realize how rebellious your heart is, there is no chance for you to receive mercy. And so God works in human history to make us aware of our basic, inherent rebellion against him. Paul concludes that everyone is a rebel, and God desires that everyone admit it, so they can receive mercy.

What is the thing that keeps any individual or nation from receiving mercy from God? It is always a self-righteous, self-confident attitude. "I don't need help. I can handle it myself. I am able to handle all the problems of life on my own. I don't need God." Any individual or nation with that attitude has cut himself off from receiving the mercy of God, for without mercy there is no way we can ever fulfill our humanity. So God, as Paul puts it here, has "bound all men over to [the knowledge of their] disobedience so that he may have mercy upon them all."

We have had an outstanding illustration of this in the fact that in the last few years two prominent national figures have remained etched in the public mind as an aftermath of Watergate: Richard Nixon and Charles Colson:

- Charles Colson came to the place where he saw his own rebellion and disobedience to God. He finally came to a place where he was driven to his knees, where he saw that without recognizing it or knowing it, he had been involved in evil things. He began to recognize the extent of it and the control it had in his life. At last he was driven to the place where he openly committed himself to the mercy of God. God changed him. In his book *Born Again* he tells how God changed him, healed him, delivered him from prison, and sent him out again to

have a new life. He is traveling across the country now, telling his story, involved deeply in a great and helpful ministry to prisoners. He is alive and enjoying life to the full.

- Richard Nixon, on the other hand, has isolated himself in a self-imposed exile in which he refuses to admit he has ever done anything wrong. Tormented with the past, he has become a national pariah, and his life is limited and narrow, crabbed, because he does not yet know of the mercy of God that is available to one who admits disobedience.

That is the way God works in history. He is constantly moving in many ways in our individual lives to bring us to an awareness of our self-righteousness and dependence on ourselves. Paul says the Jewish nation has not availed themselves of the righteousness of God. Because they are so determined to establish their own righteousness, they cannot accept the righteousness that comes by faith. That is their problem.

Now all this awakens in the apostle's heart **an outburst of praise and adoration** for the wisdom and the greatness of God. He closes this section with these words (Verses 33-36):

**Oh, the depth of the riches, the wisdom and
the knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his
paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his adviser?”
“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?”
For from him and through him and to him
are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.
{Rom 11:33-36 NIV}**

This reminder of the strange ways God works awakens within the apostle a tremendous outburst for God's inscrutable wisdom and his ways with men. As you look at these verses, you can see certain things that have amazed the apostle:

- There are the deep riches, as Paul calls them, the deep riches of God's wisdom and of his ways. They are beyond human exploration. There is no way we can finally fathom God.

I received this week in the mail a pamphlet written by a group that is trying to analyze and understand intellectually all the doctrines of the Scriptures. They struggle, obviously, to put God in a box where they can get hold of him and analyze him. But if they succeed in that, they have only reduced God to the size of a man. God is greater than man. He is beyond us. We must always remember that. Our minds cannot grasp the greatness of God! We can understand what he tells us about himself, but even beyond that, there is much more that we cannot know. There are depths of riches. That is why we are always being surprised by God if we trust him. He is always enriching us in ways that we don't anticipate.

- Then Paul speaks of God's "unsearchable judgments." We are going through one of these unsearchable judgments right now. People cannot understand this strange drought that has gripped the whole country. Meteorologists are baffled. They say, "Why does this high pressure system sit off the coast up here, and not down by Baja, where it belongs?" They are hard pressed to find somebody to blame for it and they have no control over it. They keep telling us of storms that are coming that never show up. Why? Because God's ways are unsearchable, and his ways, who can trace out? He is beyond accountability. No man can call God to account and say, "You have no right to do that!" We do it all the time, but we have no right to do it. For God is beyond us; he knows so much more than we do.

If you have any trouble with this, just read the book of Job and see the amazing list of questions that God asked and that Job could not answer. God says, "Look, this is just A B C stuff. If you can't answer these, then you have no right to quiz me on what I am doing! If you don't understand this simply kindergarten level of knowledge, how am I ever going to explain to you the vast, involved, and complex things that I am doing?"

- Paul then is impressed by the untraceable ways of God, the paths of God that are beyond understanding. We can't put it all together. We can believe it, but we can't explain it.

For instance, it is clear from Scripture that nothing God ever planned interferes with human responsibility. Nothing God has ever said will happen in any way infringes on our free will or choice. We are free to make choices. We know it. We feel ourselves free to decide to do this or that, to do good or bad. Nothing God ever plans interferes with that freedom of human choice. And yet the amazing thing is that nothing humans ever do can frustrate God's sovereign plan. Isn't that amazing? How can you explain that? No matter what we do, whether we choose this or that with the freedom of choice we have, ultimately it all works out to accomplish what God has determined shall be done. That is the kind of God we have.

- Paul is not only impressed with God's inscrutable wisdom and ways, but he contrasts it with the impotence of man. He asks three very searching questions. If you have trouble with this, try to answer his questions:

a) His first one is, "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" What he is asking is, "Who has ever anticipated what God is going to do?" Have you? Have you ever been able to figure out how God is going to handle the situations you get into? Oh, we all try, but it never turns out quite the way we think it will, does it? There is a little twist to it that we never could have guessed.

You see this in the case of Jesus. Remember how the Pharisees asked him, "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" They thought they had him! If he said "No," the Romans would be mad at him; if he said "Yes," then the Jews would be mad at him. Do you remember how he handled it? He called for a coin and said, "Whose picture is on this coin? They said, "Caesar's." He said, "All right. What Caesar has put his image on, you give to Caesar (i.e., pay your taxes); but what God has put his image on, you give that to him," {cf, Matt 22:16-22, Mark 12:13-18, Luke 20:19-26}. God had put his image on man, and that is what they owed to God – themselves. The Pharisees couldn't handle that kind of an answer. It wiped them out.

Remember the woman caught in adultery? Her stern and self-righteous accusers were ready to put her to death. Then Jesus came. He didn't do a thing at first; he just sat and wrote on the ground. He looked up, finally, and said, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," {cf, John 8:7}. They stood there, puzzled and transfixed, then every one of them began to think of other places they ought to be. Soon they were all gone, and no one was left except the woman and Jesus. How could you ever have anticipated that he was going to handle it that way? How unsearchable are his judgments! Who has anticipated what God is going to do? No one.

b) Second question: "Or who has been his adviser?" or "Who has ever suggested something that God has never thought of?" Have you ever tried that? I have. I have sometimes looked at a situation and saw the way to work it all out and suggested to God how he could do it. I thought I had been very helpful to him. But in the final outworking of the matter, it turned out that he knew things that I didn't know and he was working at things that I never saw and couldn't have seen. God's final outworking of it was right, and mine would have been wrong. So the question remains, "Who has ever suggested something to God that he has never thought of?"

c) Paul's last question is, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" That is, "Who has ever given God something that he didn't already have?" Who has put God in his debt? "Why," Paul says, "everything we are and have comes from him. He gives to us; we don't give to him." There is nothing we could give to God that he doesn't already own or have in abundance, or could make, if he had to. There is nothing.

And so he concludes with this great outburst: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." God is the originator of all things; all things come from

him. He is the sustainer of all things; they all depend on him. As C. S. Lewis puts it, "To argue with God is to argue with the very power that makes it possible to argue at all!" He is the end purpose. All things will find their culmination in God. He is the reason why all things exist. Therefore, "to him be the glory forever! Amen."

Then there occurs what must be the most terrible, tragic separation that has ever been made in the Bible. The chapter division here cuts off Paul's conclusion from all the tremendous arguments which have led up to it. For Paul goes right on to say, "Therefore..."

Therefore [because God is like this and you are like that], **I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship. {Rom 12:1 NIV}**

I don't like that translation of "spiritual worship," either. Literally, it is "logical service." You see, it is only reasonable for man to be available to God. It is even your logical reason for existence. "Therefore," he says, "bring your bodies." If you are Christians, your spirits have already surrendered to God. But you are trying to live split lives, schizophrenic lives, if your body does not follow what your spirit has already done. Now put your body where your mouth is, and follow through with what your spirit has said to God. Be his available instrument.

At this point, traditionally I should give an altar call, in which you all would bring your bodies forward. But I am not going to do that because what Paul is describing here is not an act of the moment – it is a commitment for the rest of your life. You are going to make your body available to

God for as long as you live. Paul does not talk about your soul or your spirit because you never can do anything without your body in this life.

So put your body on the line. Bring it, a living sacrifice, and the God of greatness and of glory, of infinite riches and wisdom and power, will fill that body with his own amazing life, and you will never find life to be the same again.

What an adventure of faith that will launch you on!

Prayer:

We thank you, our amazing Father, for this look at something of the wonder of your Being. How far beyond our stumbling words your greatness is! How mighty and vast you are, Lord, how powerful among the nations of earth. How terrible that we should ever feel afraid, with a God like you. How stupid, Lord, that we should ever think that we can outwit you, or cheat you, or rob you, or get away with something in your presence. How foolish, Lord, that we should ever forget that you love us and have declared that love in unmistakable ways, and that your love can only enrich us and bless us, ultimately. Therefore, Lord, lead us to the place where, in our inner spirit, in the innermost chambers of our wills, we submit ourselves to you, gladly and cheerfully and thankfully. We are thankful that we have the inestimable privilege of being children of the living God today. We ask you to lead us and send us out into the world around us this week with that truth governing all that we say and do. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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