

Romans 11:17-36 "Mysterious Mercy"

Introduction

On the Sumida River, where I walk for exercise, you can see the white Yurikamome Seagull and the black Great Cormorant. The Great Cormorant is a master fish catcher. They will quickly wade into the water and stay there for 30 seconds or at the most a minute. When they do come to the surface, they usually have a fish in their beak, which they quickly stretch out and swallow.

Unfortunately, we cannot see how the cormorant swims in the water and how it finds and captures fish. I'm curious to know what their underwater attack looks like, but it remains a mystery. However, I have to admire their skill in catching fish.

Just like the mystery of the underwater attack of the cormorant, we cannot actually see all of God's work. Even though we have the Bible, we cannot know everything about God. As we have studied Romans 9-11, we have seen God's plan, His electing grace, and the depth of His mercy. In some ways, it may be indigestible to us, because we can't fully understand everything neatly and clearly.

But, God has blessed us by perfecting wonderful things that we can never understand. Even though we can't know everything, He has revealed to us what we need, leading us to joy, thanksgiving and praise. Let's look at Romans 11 with an open mind.

Romans 11:17-36

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. ²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; ²⁷ "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."²⁸ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ 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. ³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. ³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Today's scripture emphasizes God's grace, reveals His mysterious plan of salvation, and concludes with praise to His glory. Let's focus on two main points. The first is that God's grace is extended to both Israel and Gentiles. We need to humble ourselves mutually together as God's people.

Second, keep in mind the depth of God's plan, which is full of mercy. Indeed, even disobedience and unbelief can be used for God's good purpose of renewing the whole world. Finally, let us praise the glory of the great God because of His gracious plan of salvation.

1. God's grace

Paul compares Israel to an olive tree, which is to receive the grace of God. In the Bible, Israel and the Christian church, including both Jews and Gentiles, are compared to nations, families, flocks of sheep, marriage relationships, grape and fig trees, and so on. The olive is one of the typical examples. Jeremiah 11:16. "The Lord once called you 'a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit.'"

It says that the Gentiles were grafted into Israel, God's people in the Old Covenant, to become an olive tree that would bear abundant fruit.

If you are not familiar with gardening, you may not be familiar with grafting, but it is a traditional technique used to grow vegetables and fruits. A branch of another vegetable or fruit is grafted onto the original tree (the base tree). This makes the tree stronger and more vigorous, produces more fruits, is more resistant to pests, or even limits its height so that it can be easily harvested.

What is Paul trying to say with the parable of the grafted-in olive tree? Clearly, the coming of Jesus Christ and the gospel (good news) of His death on the cross and resurrection extended the blessings of God more abundantly. Not only the Jews, but all people have come to receive the promised blessings that were once given to Israel.

The reason is that there was a rampant exclusivism that tried to limit God's grace only to the Jews. Gentiles, on the other hand, tended to discriminate and look down on Jews. Conflict, division, and strife were rampant, and the love, unity, tolerance, and forgiveness that the gospel brings were often forgotten.

He encourages the church at Rome, which had many Gentiles in it, to be humble. Do not boast in yourselves against the Jews. God's blessings were promised to Israel in the beginning, and we should be thankful that they are given to us as well by grace through faith alone, and that we are "richly nourished together".

Isn't this something we can easily forget? Look at the whole story of God's redemption that has been consistent since the Old Testament; the drama of the gospel brought about by Christ. It began with creation, and sin entered through the Fall. Yet God, who still loves humanity, chose Abraham, sent Moses, blessed the people through David, and spoke through many prophets.

It is the history of Israel. Without the Jews, we wouldn't know who God is, who we are, or what sin is. How the tragedy of mankind can be healed, God's grace and love, holiness and righteousness, and how we should live, all of these messages came through Israel.

With the coming of Christ, the principle of salvation by faith was clearly revealed, and the gospel was brought to the Gentiles. Just as an olive tree is grafted into a tree, Jews and Gentiles are made one, and the whole world is reconciled in Jesus through faith.

Do you know why it is important for Gentiles to accept Jews, to be thankful for God's mercy, and to wait for Israel to be grafted back in? The reality of the gospel and the power of God to bring salvation cannot be clearly expressed if we do not accept each other due to divisions and conflicts. The power of God's grace that brings salvation is manifested through faith.

2. The mystery of mercy

Then Paul reveals once again what God's plan is, as the mystery of God's mercy.

11:25 Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers; a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; 27 and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

Paul's writing style is a bit interesting. Don't we usually think of ourselves as wise people when we know something profound? We tend to be proud of ourselves when we learn something new and unknown. But here, once you know the secret, you don't think of yourself as a wise person. When you become an expert in any world, you become proud, but when you know the secrets of God, you have to become humble.

This is because innermost wisdom is wisdom or understanding that is hidden from man. According to the Bible, it is not revealed by human power or understanding, but only by God. It is only revealed to those who humble themselves before God. Never say that it is a special teaching that you have realized. It is God's way of letting everyone know.

As we saw last week, according to God's inner workings, the reason why some of Israel was so stubborn in rejecting the gospel was so that the gospel could be preached to the Gentiles. If all of Israel had been willing to accept the gospel, Christianity would probably have remained a Jewish only folk religion.

But because the Jews rejected the gospel and persecuted the Christians, they were driven out of the Jewish community and had to go to the Gentiles. The passion of the gospel burning in their hearts overflowed, and they testified to the gospel of Jesus that gave them life.

And, in those days, according to Paul, there will be envy among the Jews, and they will incline their ear to Christ. When the gospel comes to the fullness of the Gentiles, the world will undergo an amazing transformation. The "fullness of the Gentiles" does not only mean that the number of Christians will increase and the gospel will be preached to all Gentiles.

When you accept Jesus, your life and your relationships will be changed. That's how the power of the gospel, forgiveness of sins, new life and community come to abound everywhere.

I'm sure you all wish that would happen to you. Then the gospel will become even more attractive to Israel, and they will see the living God at work. Their stubborn hearts will be moved and they will "want that kind of salvation!" They will come to the Savior and Redeemer.

For the gift of God and the calling of God do not change. The gift refers to God's righteousness (salvation) being given to us through faith like a gift by grace. And calling is the mission originally given to Israel to be a blessing to all peoples and all people.

God is working in an amazing way, isn't He? From the disobedience of Israel, the Gentiles receive mercy, and through the mercy of the Gentiles, the Jews are blessed. This is a chain reaction of God's mercy. So, in the final summary, we are told:

11:32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, so that he may have mercy on all.

In this context, "all" implies inclusiveness: all, both Jews and Gentiles. No one, Jew or Gentile, can have an excuse for sin. But disobedience does not reign. The heart of disobedience can be changed and healed when it is surrounded by the mercy of God.

Now, I can say this to my high school Japanese teacher. When he found out that I was a Christian, he brazenly made an argument against Christianity in our language class. He said, "I don't like Christianity because it calls people sinners and criminals. I've tried to live a righteous life more than others. I've worked harder than others to live a righteous life and I don't need to be called a sinner."

Now I can answer to him, "No, sir. I understand what you are saying, but we only become our true selves when we admit the sin and darkness within us. We grow only when we accept the words that hurt our ears. Moreover, we cannot understand the darkness without the light. God's mercy and Christ's forgiveness are the light of life. Isn't it because of Christ's mercy (forgiveness) that we can recognize our sins?"

3. Praise of God's glory

11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who has become the Lord's counselor? 35 or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Thus, when we know the truth of the gospel, which is called the innermost mystery of God, our hearts are lifted up to God. It is an offering of praise and thanksgiving. Do you have this kind of gratitude, joy, and praise? All things are created, preserved, kept alive, saved, and remade by God.

Check to see if you have a humble heart before God, a heart full of wonder. If you think you know it all, you don't know even a fraction of what you need to know. If you believe in Jesus, but have no praise or thanksgiving to God, then you need to pour the gospel into your stubborn heart.

The manifestation of God's glory is the hope of mankind. Where God is praised, there is also your salvation.

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father. We lift up your holy name and praise the gospel of Christ. Your plan is perfect, and You fulfill all our desires and prayers according to Your will.

Nevertheless, we have not listened to Your Word and have been indifferent to Your plan. Forgive me for not obeying your call and instead pursuing my own happiness and prosperity, even though you continually speak to me throughout the Bible.

As we learned today, open our eyes to the plans you have for Israel. Lead them to accept their Messiah. Please fill the Gentiles with your grace to do this. Because we also are prone to disobedience, may we continually turn to you through your Word and Spirit.

We pray and ask that Your plan of salvation will be fully accomplished. Only let your name be lifted up, the splendor of Christ be exalted, and the beauty of your Spirit be praised.

I pray in Christ's name. Amen.