Oh, The Depths

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Unshakeable: Romans / Romans 11:7–36

When I was a kid, I used to watch Bob Ross.

If you don't know who he is, he was the painter on TV with the big afro and the soft voice who would talk you through a whole painting in half an hour.

I know that's a strange thing for a kid to be into, but I was captivated. Part of it was his voice. It was so calm and relaxing: "Just a few strokes of green right there… a little bright blue up here."

But more than that, it was watching what his paintings turned into. He'd start with a soft wash of colour across the canvas, and then he'd put down these dark strokes that didn't look like anything. A smear here. A line there.

And the whole time you're sitting there wondering, *What in the world is he making? What could this possibly be?* It just looked random. Sometimes it looked like he'd ruined the whole thing.

But he'd keep going. You'd start to see it come together, *Oh, that's a tree. That's a mountain. Those streaks are actually clouds, and that's water flowing down into a lake.*

And even though he could see it in his mind, he knew what he was putting together, to us it seemed random, it seemed like chaos.

I think that's what Paul wants us to see as he unfolds the mystery of God's plan to reach the nations. From our perspective maybe it looks like randomness, maybe we wonder what in the world is God doing through it all, how does he bring this all together?

But in the passage, we're reading today, Paul steps back from the canvas and lets us see the whole picture. He's been showing us God's masterpiece: salvation reaching the nations.

And what seemed like chaos and randomness turns out to be a carefully orchestrated plan. When Paul finally sees it all come together, he stops explaining and starts worshipping, singing of God's wisdom, His knowledge and His mercy.

God's plan of salvation is so wise that only He could do it, and only He deserves the praise.

Would you stand with me as we read Romans 11, starting at verse 7?

I think it would help us this morning to see what all of this has been leading to, because if we start there, we can keep that end in mind.

Paul ends this whole section in worship. You see it there in verses 33.

Romans 11:33 ESV

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

Paul ends this section in awe and worship of the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

I think it's important to keep that in mind because we have been digging deep over these past few weeks in rich theology. And we can get lost in the rich theology and forget that it's meant to lead us to worship.

We've been talking about God's sovereignty and election and Israel's place in the gospel.

And all of that is rich, rich information that helps build up our understanding.

But true, meaningful theology should always lead to authentic worship.

That's the point of studying the Word, and studying theology and doctrine, it's always to deepen our affections and our worship of the God we serve.

This is nothing more than Paul being absolutely overwhelmed with God's wisdom, His knowledge and how He works things out in ways that you and I never would and never could.

The point of this is that we come to the end of this and we stand in awe and worship of God.

What's lead him to this point in chapter 11? Well it's him reflecting on how God has used Israel to reach the nations.

That's the major focus of chapter 11.

God has used Israel to reach the nations, but He does in a way that only he could.

Here's what we see, Only God could use the rejection of Israel to save the nations.

REJECTION OF ISRAEL

Just go back to the question of this whole section, has God rejected Israel?

Has God turned his back on Israel, because Israel doesn't seem to be responding to the gospel, they have rejected Christ.

And remember what Paul said at the beginning of this chapter, he says absolutely, you know how I know? Because I'm a Jew.

Romans 11:1–2 ESV

[1] I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. [2] God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew….

Paul says I know God hasn't turned his back on Israel, otherwise I wouldn't be here, I'm a Jew who has believed in the gospel, so there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

There is a number of Jews who have responded to the gospel, who have been chosen. The promises were never meant for every descendant of Abraham remember but those whom God has chosen.

Well what about the rest? That's where things get interesting.

Romans 11:7 ESV

7 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened,

There's been a hardening that has come over some of Israel. Israel has become hardened to the gospel, that's why they're not responding.

Think about this now, how often has God reached His hand out to Israel? Remember in chapter 10, at the end, God says all day long I have held out my hand… and that is true, isn't it?

Remember, God delivering Israel from Egypt in miraculous ways, remember God revealing His Word, His glory through His servant Moses. Remember God's presence travelling in the wilderness, remember God's prophets calling Israel to repent and turn to the Lord, remember Jesus coming to Israel and crying out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have wanted to gather you like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings but you were not willing."

How often, how long has the Lord reached His hand out to Israel, but they responded in complaining, in wanting to turn back, in worshipping false idols, and ignoring the warnings of the prophets, in crucifying God's Son.

Israel has hardened their hearts time and time again to God and so finally God said I will harden Israel.

Paul quotes their very own prophets to show this is not a surprise.

He quotes from Deuteronomy in verse 8.

Romans 11:8 ESV

8 ***as it is written,***
“God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.”

And he quotes from Isaiah and the Psalms in verses 9.

Romans 11:9 ESV

9 And David says,
“Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them.

Yet before we shake our head at Israel, that should be sobering warning for you and I.

It’s a universal principle, that if anyone hears the truth and does not respond to it, a time comes in which he or she may be incapable of responding to it.

If we continue to harden our hearts towards the Lord, there may come a day when that hardening remains.

There is such a danger for us as well, who are so often exposed to the truth of God’s Word, to sit under the preaching and teaching of God’s Word that we can just become numb to it, unresponsive, that we can sense that conviction in our hearts and yet ignore it.

The danger is that we can sit under the Word of God, hear it, but have no response to it.

Paul says there are some of Israel, a remnant, that have responded, but there is a partial hardening on Israel, and that’s why they aren’t responding.

But what he reveals in the wisdom and knowledge of God is that it's for reason.

Look what he says there in verse 11.

Romans 11:11 ESV

[11] ***So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.***

There's a reason, a purpose. God has used the rejection of Israel to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Their rejection of the Messiah means you, and I and other non-Jews now have access to the gospel, but there's another purpose that God is using there, do you see it? So as to make Israel jealous.

Oh the depths of the wisdom of God… this is how he brings the gospel to the nations. This is the wisdom of God at work.

He hasn't forsaken Israel no, the gospel went to Israel, but we know what happened. Israel rejected it.

Jesus hinted at this, right? Remember when the Gentile woman came to Him begging Him to heal her daughter? Jesus said to her, "Let the children be fed first" (Mark 7:27). Did you catch that word? *First.* The gospel was going to Israel first. But "first" means there's a second. Others were going to be fed too.

And then Jesus told a story about a man who threw a great banquet (Luke 14:16–24). He sent out the invitations, but one by one the invited guests made excuses. They wouldn't come. So what did he do? He told his servant, "Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city… go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled."

That's exactly what Paul is describing. The ones who were invited first said no, and so the doors were thrown open to everyone else. And that's where you and I come in.

Remember when Paul brought the gospel to the Jews and they ran him out of the city and he said because of their rejection, we will take the gospel to the Gentiles.

This is God's plan, it's why the gospel is the power of God to all who believe, the Jew first and then the Greek.

The depths of the wisdom and the knowledge of God, God has plan and Israel's rejection means salvation for the Gentiles.

God is doing a work, things aren't always as they seem, it may seem like Israel has rejected their God, but God is doing a work in taking the gospel to the nations.

And this was Israel's purpose all along, to reach the nations. The blessing of Abraham was that his descendants would be a blessing to the nations, God has a heart for the nations, He doesn't just want to reach one people group, He wants to reach the nations and Israel in large part failed in that regard, and so God takes matters in His own hands.

He brings a partial hardening on Israel, and the gospel goes to the Gentiles.

It makes us wonder doesn't it, that God's heart was to reach the nations so much, that when Israel didn't fulfill that purpose, He created a way around them.

Like, if God's heart is to reach the nations, shouldn't that be our heart, shouldn't we have a heart to go and make disciples of the nations?

Shouldn't we have this longing to be a part of God's work? One thing is for sure, God will reach the nations with or without you. We can either choose to be part of the blessing of reaching the nations, or God is going around us.

But wait, that doesn't mean that God is done with Israel yet. God hasn't turned His back on Israel to focus on the Gentiles, to never deal with Israel again, did you catch that second part?

Look again at verse 11, ***salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.***

Here's that wisdom of God. He knows what happens when fathers give their attention to siblings. The other sibling gets jealous.

My kids are older now, but it was much more apparent when they were really young.

You would try to play with one and they wouldn't want anything to do with Dad, but as soon as Dad sits down and starts having fun with their sibling, what do they say? "I wanna play."

The wisdom of God is He knows, that when He focuses His attention on the Gentiles, it will draw Israel back to Him.

There is this hint here, Paul gives, that in the future there will be a large return of the Jews to God, a revival amongst the Jews.

Romans 11:12–15 ESV

12 ***Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!***

13 ***Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry 14 in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. 15 For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?***

Paul says, hey picture this, if Israel's rejection of the Messiah, meant the richness of salvation for the Gentiles, what could it mean for the full inclusion! In verse 15, Paul says if their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance of Christ mean but life from the dead!

This idea drives Paul to reach the Gentiles all the more he says, so I preach to reach the Gentiles even more to make Israel jealous.

Paul seems to be saying, that we shouldn't leave out the truth, that although Israel in large part has rejected Christ, that God is not done with them just yet.

That they would be stirred up in jealousy and return to the Lord and imagine what that could mean, if their rejection brought salvation and richness of life in Christ, what could their coming back mean, but life from the dead. And in that statement, some see an arrow pointing to Christ's return.

At some point, near the return of Christ, we will see a mass return of Jews coming to the Lord, by faith in Christ.

Now stay with me, because Paul expands on this in verses 25-27, this is where the heart of that teaching is.

Romans 11:25–26 ESV

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,

Paul is spelling Gods plan out in detail here. He's saying, I don't want you to be unaware of this mystery. The key word is mystery. It means that there is something going on in the outflowing of God's progressive plan of the gospel that we can't fully see or understand.

Paul says a partial hardening has come upon Israel, but it's only for a season, only for a time, a season where the fullness of the Gentiles come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.

Now, believe it or not, those are some of the most debated words in the New Testament. What does Paul mean when he says *all Israel will be saved*?

Many good teachers read this as a future turning of the Jewish people as a whole to Christ, once the full number of Gentiles has come in. And I do believe Paul is

pointing to that. I believe God will bring many Jews to faith in Jesus near the end. But I think “all Israel” here means something even bigger.

Notice the flow of thought. Some of Israel has been chosen, a remnant, saved by grace. Then a partial hardening comes on the rest, and the gospel goes out to the Gentiles. Then, when the full number of the Gentiles has come in, Israel is stirred to jealousy and many return to the Lord. And Paul says, *“and in this way all Israel will be saved.”* In this way. Through all of it: the remnant, the Gentiles, and the Jews who come back.

Remember what Paul told us back in chapter 9? *“Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.”* From the very beginning, God’s Israel was never simply about bloodline.

It was about the people of promise; the people God chose by grace. So when Paul says *all Israel*, I believe he’s widening the lens. He’s talking about every one of God’s chosen people, across every generation, Jew and Gentile together, one family of faith. Not one family for Israel and another for the Church. One people saved the same way, by grace through faith in the same Messiah.

Do you see the wisdom of God in that? Israel’s now opened the door to the nations. The nations coming in stirs Israel to come back. And at the end of it all, God has one complete family, every last one of His people, gathered in.

Who would have planned it that way? Who could have? Only God.

Only God could use the rejection of Israel to bring the gospel to the nations.

But how does God do that? How does He bring together one family of faith? How does God make many people groups one?

Well Paul shows us that in verse 17, look back there with me.

Romans 11:17–20 ESV

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.

Here's what Paul is saying here.

FAMILY

Only God could make outsiders part of His family.

Paul gives us this image of grafting, it's an agricultural image.

To be honest I had no idea and I've read this passage numerous times, but it wasn't until this week that I found out it was an actual thing. That gardeners and farmers have been doing it for thousands of years.

You take a branch from one tree and cut a notch into another tree, the one with good, strong roots. You set the branch into that cut and bind the two together. Over time, something remarkable happens. The branch and the tree grow together, the sap from the roots begins to flow into the branch, and that branch starts to live off a root that isn't its own. In fact most apples that we eat in Ontario are grown this way.

You get the image that Paul is trying to give here. That Israel is the olive tree and all of God's promises flow, the life of those promises flow to Israel through the patriarchs and you and I, though we have no right to those promises, and nothing to offer for them, God has graciously grafted us into the olive tree.

But notice the grafted branches are wild olive.

Normally a gardener takes a good branch and grafts it onto a wild tree. Paul says God did the opposite. He took wild branches, us, and grafted them into His cultivated olive tree. Paul even says in verse 24 that this is *contrary to nature*. No gardener would do it that way.

The point of this is two-fold. For us to see and be in awe of God's grace towards us, we have no right, no obligation to be part of God's family tree. We're wild off shoots, that in normal circumstances, don't belong. But God in His grace and mercy has taken those who were far off from His promises and grafted us into His family tree.

But with that comes humility. Notice what Paul says.

Romans 11:19–22 ESV

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.

The temptation is for us to become proud, even boastful over Israel. Foolish Israel, look what God has done since you have rejected Him. And to our shame many Christians have, we've looked down on Israel, persecuted Israel.

As much as Martin Luther the reformer is celebrated, to his shame he called on Christians to do terrible things to the Jewish people later in life.

Early in his ministry, Luther actually wrote that Christians should treat Jews with kindness, since Jesus Himself was born a Jew. He hoped that once they heard the gospel clearly, they would come to faith.

But they didn't. And over the years Luther grew bitter. Near the end of his life, he wrote urging Christians to set fire to Jewish synagogues and schools. He wrote, "I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed."

Many have said that Luther struck the match, but Hitler fanned the flame.

One famous poet wrote, How odd of God to choose the Jew, but not so odd as those who choose the Jewish God but hate the Jew.

No in some respects we owe a debt of gratitude to the Jews, for from them, their patriarchs, flow the promises of God that give us eternal life.

That keeps us from exalting ourselves over Israel.

But here's what we notice is so important. Notice that there is not two trees, but one. It means there are not two separate people of God, but one. There is not a tree growing for Israel, and a tree growing for the Gentile, no, but there is one family tree of God, one people of God made up of Jew and Gentile.

This is the work that God is doing. Creating for Himself a family, a family made up of people from every nation, every tribe, every tongue. And He does it in such a way that only He can.

Using His wisdom and His knowledge and the rejection of the Jews to graft into His family those who are from all over the world.

Look around the room this morning, we see that wisdom, that glory, that grace displayed. People from all over the world, worshipping the same God, is not by accident, but by God's design.

The depths of His wisdom. Only He could use the rejection of Israel to reach the nations, only He could make outsiders part of His family.

Only He could work in a way that mercy reaches everyone's disobedience.

MERCY

Like, here we are, we one people of God, Jew and Gentile and here's the truth of it, all of us have been brought into God's family even though we don't deserve it, even though we've done nothing to earn it.

God alone gets the glory because God alone has extended mercy.

He has extended mercy to the Jews.

We see what Paul says there in verse 28.

Romans 11:28–29 ESV

[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.

Paul is saying, even though time after time Israel has rejected Him, forsaken His promises, that they are beloved by God for the sake of their forefather.

For the sake of the promises that God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the promises God made to David.

God has kept His promises that through one man they would become a great nation. He has promised them, a faithful righteous king that would through the line of David, that a messiah would come through their race, God has kept His promise.

For the calling and gifts of God are irrevocable and that's good news for Israel, that God doesn't call a people to Himself, and then change His mind about them. God is faithful, faithful even though at times His people are unfaithful.

That is good news of mercy to Israel, but it's good news of mercy to you and me.

Because that's really what's at the heart of this question, has God turned His back on Israel? Because if God has turned His back on Israel, then how do we know He won't turn His back on us? If God has not kept His promise to Israel, how do we know He'll keep His promises to us?

But the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable! God is faithful, He is merciful.

The Lord is merciful and gracious slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love…the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him.

He has shown mercy to Israel, and He has shown mercy to you and me.

Romans 11:30–32 ESV

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.

We look at Israel sometimes with such judging eyes, but Paul says, Hey, God has shown you mercy as well, don't forget, because at one time you were disobedient to God, but now you have received mercy, because of their disobedience.

Remember at one time you were far off from God, removed from His promises, dead in your trespasses and sin, but now because of God's mercy He has drawn you near.

No one can look to the Lord and say I am here because I deserve it, no one can look to the Lord and say He owes us something. No, everything we have from His hand is because of His mercy.

But Paul is saying His mercy comes full circle because Israel has rejected the gospel and so they have become disobedient, but one day in the future His mercy will be extended to them.

This is the wisdom of God, that he has consigned disobedience to all, so that he can show all mercy.

No wonder that Paul ends the way he does. In absolute awe and wonder and worship of the riches and the wisdom of God.

Romans 11:33–36 ESV

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.

Theology has to lead us to worship, doesn’t it?

And when Paul sees all of this, how God has woven our disobedience and His mercy into one plan, He can’t keep explaining anymore. He just has to worship.

Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God… To Him be glory forever. Amen!

Remember Bob Ross? All those dark strokes that didn’t look like anything? The smear that looked like he’d ruined the whole thing? And then, at the end, he’d step back from the canvas, and you could finally see it. It was a picture the whole time.

That’s what Paul does in verses 33 to 36. He steps back from the canvas and he looks at how God’s wisdom and knowledge have brought the whole thing together and he just breaks forth in worship.

And maybe it isn’t just chapters 9, 10 and 11. Maybe this worship is the pinnacle of everything Paul has been saying since Romans chapter 1.

Maybe Paul is overwhelmed as he steps back and sees the whole picture of the gospel. The God who from the beginning of creation sought to reveal Himself to us. Who, even though we rejected Him and made false gods to worship, even though we stood under His wrath and judgment, He did not abandon us.

Who provided a way for you and me to be made right with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. Who, by faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, justifies us, unites us to Christ, and raises us to walk in new life.

Who gives us His Holy Spirit to overcome the flesh, adopts us as His children, and promises that nothing shall separate us from His love. Who from eternity

past didn't leave any of it to chance, but chose and called a people for Himself, and is even working through those who rejected Him to accomplish His plan.

And when all of that dawns on Paul, he can't help but break out in praise: *"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!"*

His wisdom and His knowledge go hand in hand, don't they? God knows things we will never discover. He knows hearts and minds. He knows not just what will happen, but what could happen. And His wisdom is what He does with everything He knows, and it's always perfect, because He applies that knowledge perfectly. He sees what we can't see, and He is using it to bring people to salvation.

"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?". But who does God go to when He needs counsel? Who does He turn to and say, "I'm not really sure what to do here, what do you think?" Is it you? Is it me? Are we the ones who look at God's plan and say, "Hmm, I'm not sure I would have done it that way"? No. His ways are beyond finding out.

"For from Him and through Him and toHhim are all things." Everything comes from Him, everything flows through Him, and everything finds its meaning and purpose in Him. So He works all things for His glory.

That's why there are two dangers for us this morning. There's the danger of worship without understanding, worship that doesn't know why it worships. That's shallow worship. But there's also the danger of theology without worship, understanding that never moves our hearts. That's lifeless.

We've spent these weeks in some deep theology. But it was never meant to stop at our heads. It was meant to bring us here, to where Paul is, standing back from the canvas, seeing the picture God has been painting all along, and saying with Him:

"To Him be glory forever. Amen."