

Understanding Romans 11

by Casey Head

We are told by Paul in Ephesians 5:17, “Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.” From this verse, we can conclude that the will of God is understandable. The Bible can be understood through diligent study and devotion. At the same time, Peter tells us that some of the Bible is difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16). Certainly, this could be said of Paul’s message in Romans 11. It is a difficult chapter for many, but as established earlier, it can be understood.

Many religious people turn to Romans 11 to show that all physical Jews will be saved, that their lineage ensures their salvation. Paul does say in verse 26, “And so all Israel shall be saved,” and again in vers 29, “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance (irrevocable),” but these verses do not teach the automatic eternal security of Israel. Let us take just a few moments to strive to understand Romans 11.

First of all, let’s begin at the beginning. It says in verse one, “Hath God cast away His people? God forbid. For I am also an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.” The gospel dispensation, although it affected only the Jews in the beginning, eventually spread to all nations, as foretold in the Old Testament. As a result of this new nation of people (a spiritual nation of Jews AND Gentiles), the Jews may have inferred that the religion of Christ excluded them. Paul here is correcting that misconception. While the Jews had been severed as the chosen people of God (11:22) and while the Gentiles had been grafted in (11:17), they could still be saved, just as Paul, a fellow Israelite, was saved. Understanding the context of Romans 11:26 will help us greatly.

With these things in mind, what is the point of verse 26? Was Paul saying that all Israel would be saved because of their physical lineage? Was he saying that the Jews could continue to observe the old covenant and be redeemed? Not at all. First, let us consider the word “so” in verse 26; it literally means “in this manner.” It was “in this manner” that all Israel would be saved. The remainder of verse 26 says, “There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.” Do you see the point? Yes, all of the Israelites could be saved, but it was through the Deliverer, Jesus Christ, and through Him alone. Just as Paul, a fellow Israelite, was saved by Christ (11:1), so could his kinsmen be saved. To further the point that this verse is not teaching the automatic eternal security of Israel, turn to 11:14. Paul says here, “If by any means I may provoke to emulation *them which are my flesh*, and *MIGHT save some of them*.” Clearly, the Jews were not automatically saved. Paul wanted to lead as many of them as he could to salvation, which confirms our point- they could be saved only through Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Now that we have come to understand verse 26, let us turn our attention to verse 29 which says, “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance (irrevocable).” Again, many religious people pervert the meaning of this verse and use it to teach the universal salvation of the Jews. After all, God called them originally, and He’s not going to turn away from them now, right? Right! But that doesn’t mean that they are all literally saved despite their refusal of Christ. The point is simple. They were God’s chosen people in the past and they can still be saved, despite the salvation of the Gentiles. But again, it is “in this manner.” It is through the Deliverer, Jesus Christ. While they are no longer His chosen people, they can still be saved.

I hope that these few points have aided you in your understanding of Romans 11. While it may be a difficult text, and one that is frequently misused, we can understand its message. Let us realize that the nation of Israel is no longer God’s “chosen” nation. In order for Jews to be saved, they must turn to Christ, and to Christ alone. After all, He is their promised Messiah!