

Conference on the Church for God's Glory, 2026

The Mystery of God's Mercy
An Exposition of Romans 11:25-32
Delivered by Pastor Steven Thomas
Huron Baptist Church, Flat Rock, MI

Introduction: The format of this message reflects the teaching of the influential Puritan, William Perkins (1558—1602). He wrote the first textbook on homiletics published in the English language.¹ In it he encouraged preachers to: 1) examine the text of Scripture, 2) draw from it a point of doctrine, 3) answer objections to the doctrine, and 4) discuss the use (viz., application) of the doctrine. This structure complements the goal of this presentation.

Perkins also provides a good preview of a key element of the discussion. He was certainly not a dispensationalist, but he boldly insisted that the Bible, and especially the text before us, teaches that God will bring about an eschatological mass conversion of ethnic Israel:

“The Lord saith, All the nations shall be blessed in Abraham: hence I gather that the nation of the Jews shall be called, and converted to the participation of this blessing: when, and how, God knows; but that it shall be done before the end of the world we know.”²

I. The biblical text explained: Romans 11:25-32 (ESV)

The body of Paul's epistle to the believers in Rome began with a clear and stern indictment of both Gentiles and Israel: both are under God's condemnation for sin (1:18-3:20). He argued that the only solution to the universal plight of humanity is alien righteous (viz., righteous that comes from another, Roman 3:21ff.), righteousness made possible because of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ (3:22-26). This righteous by faith is not some new thing; it has always been the means of salvation (4:1-25). All who trust Christ are united to him by faith and thus receive the benefits of eternal salvation (5:1-21), spiritual freedom and transformation by the Holy Spirit of God (6:1-7:25), and future glory that is absolutely secured for us (8:1-39).

In chapter 9, Paul begins an extended discussion designed to demonstrate that “it is not as though the word of God has failed” (9:6). God's favor shown to the nations does not mean that God has failed *the nation*, Israel. God is sovereign over salvation, choosing whom he will save and when he will save them. Kindness extended to the nations does not imply that God has “rejected” Israel (11:1). The text before us is the climax to Paul's argument.

A. The mystery revealed: All Israel will be saved. 25-27

¹ William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996).

² Cited by Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), p. 42.

The biblical word “mystery” does not signify something puzzling; it refers to that which is unknowable apart from divine revelation.

1. God revealed this truth to humble *us*. 25a

²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery,

Paul spoke directly to the Gentile believers. There is no reason for Israel’s current plight to justify ethnic or national pride. He will demonstrate that humility is the only proper response.

2. God has hardened Israel, but this hardness is:

- a. Partial—Some Jews trust Christ today. 25b

brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel,

The term “hardened” is related to “callus.” Spiritual insensitivity came on the Israelites. This is God’s doing (divine passive).

The hardening is not complete. This does not refer to the degree of insensitivity, but to the number whom God hardens. The analogy of the olive tree states that of the branches representing Israel, only some were “broken off” (11:17-18). This accounts for Paul’s argument that Israelites, including himself, are still being saved (11:1-2).

- b. Temporary—The hardness will last until a specific point in history, namely, when the last Gentile is converted in this age. 25c

until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

“Until” indicates that Israel’s hardening will be relieved following this time marker.”

The Diaspora of the Israelites is not permanent. It continued after the first advent of Christ because he came unto his own but his own rejected him (John 1:11). Thus, the nations that trampled Jerusalem would continue their dominance (Luke 21:24, cf. Matthew 21:43-44).

Note that Jesus specified a time frame for the Gentiles’ dominance of Israel (Luke 21:24). Paul speaks fullness of the Gentiles—

probably a specific number. Cf. Acts 13:48; Acts 18:9-10; 2 Peter 3:9).

3. God will bring Israel to repentant faith *en masse*. 26-27

a. The Messiah, now despised, will deliver ethnic Israel. 26a

²⁶ *And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,
“The Deliverer will come from Zion,*

“And in this way” refers to the sovereign God’s oversight the sequences laid out for his plan.

All Israel will be saved” is the *crux interpretum* of the passage. For reasons to be discussed below, the clearest option is that this statement refers to the elect ethnic Jews who comprise the generation Christ referred to in the end times (Matthew 21:43). As a nation, they will “look on him whom they have pierced” (Zechariah 12:10) and mass conversion will follow.

The Deliverer who saves all Israel is the One whom they rejected. Compare this verse with 9:33.

b. The Messiah will fully and truly transform ethnic Israel. 26b

he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;

c. The Messiah will execute the New Covenant he promised to ethnic Israel. 27

²⁷ *“and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”*

Spiritual transformation of “Jacob” refers to the New Covenant specifically promised to Israel (viz., Jacob).

A Key Point: God’s sovereign plan to save ethnic Israel has kingdom (national) implications.

B. The mystery explained: All Israel will be saved because “God has not rejected his people.” 28-29

1. God considers Israel a “beloved enemy.” 28

Part of the mystery is God's revealed relationship with Israel: simultaneously an enemy and beloved.

- a. Today, Israel is God's enemy for the sake of the nations. 28a

²⁸ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake

Ethnic Israel, as a nation, rejected God's Son and incurred the wrath of God (cf. Hebrews 10:29). But in the plan of God, their rejection launched the gospel mission to the Gentiles. So, they are "enemies for your sake."

- b. Simultaneously, Israel is God's beloved for the sake of her forefathers. 28b

But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.

Israel's rejection of Christ never resulted in the nullification of God's love for Israel as a nation. This love is not grounded in Israel's deeds, but God's promises to her forefathers.

2. God guarantees the fulfillment of covenant promises he made to Israel. 29

²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

The gifts are clearly the spiritual blessing and promises made to the patriarch. See 9:4-5.

A Key Point: God's sovereign plan to save ethnic Israel rests upon His unchanging character.

C. The mystery "untied:" All Israel will be saved so that the sovereign God will display his mercy. 30-32

The final verses of this text serve as Paul's *denouement*. He unties and disentangles the threads of the mystery to reveal its ultimate purpose.

Romans 11:30-32

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.

1. God used Israel's disobedience to bring mercy to disobedient nations. 30

2. God will use Israel's current disobedience to bring the same mercy to her in the future. 31

“For Jew and Gentile alike, the end of the road is God's mercy; and for each the road leads through disobedience.”³

3. God imprisoned all nations in sin for this purpose: to display the wonder of His mercy. 32

Chapter 9 showcases God's sovereignty over the salvation of ethnic Israel and the nations. His authority is absolute and his design is beyond questioning.

A Key Point: God's sovereign plan to save ethnic Israel is driven by doxology.

II. A Doctrinal proposition

Romans 11:25-32 escapes all attempts to reduce it to a simple summary. Below is a summary, but complex. The sentence contains seven sections, each of which has theological loadbearing significance.

God has a sovereign plan for history
that will culminate in the Kingdom He promised to his elect nation, Israel,
whom He will save *en masse*,
transform and restore by the promises of her New Covenant,
rule through His chosen Deliverer,
thus bringing promised blessing to all nations,
in order to showcase His wondrous mercy.

III. Objections answered

In 1965 Charles Ryrie published his now famous formulation of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. He argued that 1) the distinction between Israel and the Church, 2) a consistent literal hermeneutic, and 3) the doxological purpose of history are the essential and defining elements of dispensationalism.⁴ The first item on his list remains a flashpoint in the division between the two dominant interpretive approaches: Reformed theology and dispensational theology.⁵ Technically, one cannot disentangle the three

³ C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Rev. ed., Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1991), 208. Barrett goes on to add insightfully, “In each case, behind disobedience and mercy, stands the same sovereign divine activity,” 209.

⁴ Charles C. Ryrie. *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1965). Some within quasi-dispensational camps chafe against his rubric, but usually display superficial readings of these ideas.

⁵ “Reformed” has become something of a faddish label, often embraced without theological understanding. Some Christians mistakenly self-identify as Reformed because they appreciate and affirm the five “*solas*” or embrace the “doctrines of grace.” But Reformed theology does not have a unique and exclusive claim to these doctrines. Every true Christian affirms the five *solas*. Furthermore, there is no logical or historical reason to assume Reformed theology has exclusive claim to the five points of Calvinism. The true divide between Reformed theology

elements of Ryrie’s taxonomy, even in this limited passage. However, for our purposes the dispute about the relationship between Israel and Church will be our principal focus.

- A. The core supersessionist argument: The church has superseded Israel in the plan of God; therefore, national (political) Israel will not be restored.

Supersessionism is not monolithic; it has multiple versions. Yet they all deny any distinct role for *national* Israel in a future eschatological Kingdom. Michael Vlach states the matter forcefully:

“Put simply, no supersessionists believe in Israel's restoration, but all nonsupersessionists believe in Israel's restoration.”⁶

- B. Three versions of supersessionism with brief exegetical responses:

As noted above, Romans 11:25-32 is the climactic conclusion chapters 9-11, and the paragraph turns on this statement: “All Israel will be saved” (26a).⁷ Reformed theologians champion three disparate interpretations of this declaration.⁸

1. Past Replacement View (The Church is the new Israel)⁹

Explanation:

In this context, “Israel” *does not* refer to ethnic Jews. At the first advent, God rejected Israel because Israel rejected her promised Messiah. Subsequently, God replaced Israel in His plan. In this age, God recalibrated the promises he made to national Israel and her patriarchs so that they now apply to the church “spiritually.” Those who hold this view do not embrace the label, “replacement.” Even so, it is an apt descriptor.

Response: A Lexical Problem

The larger context strongly argues against this viewpoint. Over a span of three chapters, Paul undeniably distinguished ethnic Israel from Gentiles.

He made this distinction at the beginning of the section:

and dispensationalism is not soteriological, but ecclesiological: has the church superseded Israel in the plan of God. The answer to this question also carries profound eschatological implications.

⁶ Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 19–20.

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 712.

⁸ For a concise explanation of these three views (though not with these specific headings), see Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 137-40

⁹ The Replacement View is represented by authors and theologians such as Martin Luther, Karl Barth, O. Palmer Robertson, G. K. Beale, Robert Reymond. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. and Dennis E. Johnson also seem to lean toward this position.

Romans 9:3–5

³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

He maintained this distinction over the three chapters to the very end.

Romans 11:30–31

³⁰ For just as you [Gentiles] were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their [ethnic Israel] disobedience, ³¹ so they [ethnic Israel] too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you [Gentiles] they [ethnic Israel] also may now receive mercy.

Throughout this discussion, Paul's use of the words "Israel" or "Israelite" (9:4, 5, 6, 27, 31; 10:1, 19, 21; 11:1, 2, 7, 25) consistently refer to ethnic Jews. It is indisputable that the "*partial hardening [that] has come upon Israel*" (v. 25) describes the spiritual condition of ethnic Jews. And yet, the replacement view argues that the word "Israel" which appears twice in the same sentence (vv. 25-26, Greek) carries two different lexical meanings. Such exegesis strains credulity and crosses the boundary into eisegesis. This explains why this view has never gained significant traction (as least since the Middle Ages) and remains the minority viewpoint.

2. Present Remnant View (The sum of all Jewish conversions in this age)¹⁰

Explanation:

In this context, "Israel" *does* refer to ethnic Jews. However, the conversion of ethnic Jews does not happen in an eschatological revival. "All Israel will be saved" identifies the totality of elect Jews (a small number due to divine "hardening"). They will experience conversion in small numbers throughout the span of church history. The conversion of this small remnant will take place alongside the expansive ingathering of converted Gentiles (v. 25).

Response: A Contextual Problem

To those who champion this view, one may simply ask, "Where is the mystery?" Paul began the paragraph, *I do not want you to be unaware of*

¹⁰ The Remnant View is represented by authors and theologians such as John Calvin (though inconsistent), William Hendriksen, Anthony Hoekema, Louis Berkhof, Herman Bavinck (?), Sam Waldron, Simon Kistemaker.

this mystery, brothers. Which part of this interpretation requires special revelation?

- Was it the fact that God would save Jews? The Romans already knew this—Jews were present in their assemblies.
- Was it the fact that God set aside (hardened) national Israel? Jesus revealed this (cf. Matthew 21:43).
- Was it the fact that God would save all of the elect Jews? Surely Paul’s “golden chain of salvation” already made that clear (Romans 8:29-30).

The remnant view does not stand up to scrutiny in the immediate context.

3. Future Revival View (Jewish conversion *en masse*)¹¹

Explanation:

In this context, “Israel” *does* refer to ethnic Jews. However, this view is distinguished from the previous view by the belief that a large-scale conversion of ethnic Jews will occur in an eschatological revival. “All Israel will be saved” means the totality of elect Jews in the specific generation living at the conclusion of this age. This position aligns with dispensational eschatology. The differing feature is denial that this conversion results in the restoration of the Jewish nation.

Response: An Exegetical Problem

Refusal to affirm that the conversion of “all Israel” will move toward the restoration of the Jewish nation results from a spiritualized reading of the text.

John Murray correctly notes, regarding Paul’s Old Testament quotation in v. 27:

The first part of the quotation is from Isaiah 59:20, 21 and the last part derived from Jeremiah 31:34. There should be no question but Paul regards these Old Testament passages as applicable to the restoration of Israel.¹²

But in almost the same breath, Murray adds:

¹¹ The Revival View is represented by authors and theologians such as Augustine, William Perkins, John Owen, Andrew Fuller, Richard Baxter, Andrew Bonar, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, J. C. Ryle, John Murray, Leon Morris, Geerhardus Vos (?), Herman Ridderbos, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, Thomas Schriener, Doug Moo, C E.B. Cranfield, Thomas Schriener, Sinclair Ferguson, D. A. Carson, etc., clearly the most popular view.

¹² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 98–99.

There is no suggestion of any privilege or status but that which is common to Jew and Gentile in the faith of Christ.¹³

Thus, Murray lifts spiritual benefits from the New Covenant and applies them to a future regenerate Israel. But he ignores other clear Scriptural elements of this New Covenant. For example, the covenant promises contained in Isaiah 59:20-21 serve as the prelude to Isaiah 60:1-22. This chapter is a song of exultation at the glories God promises to bestow on a future generation of Israel. These glories are very tangible, not just spiritual. They include:

- Israel will become a reflection of the glory of the Lord (v. 2)
- The nations will be drawn to her light (v. 3)
- The sons and daughters of Israel will return from the Diaspora (4)
- The wealth of the nations will pour into Israel (5-12)
- The humbled nations will stream to Jerusalem to worship (13-14)
- Israel will be made majestic forever (15)
- Israel will flourish as the nation above nations because of her Savior (16)
- Israel will have a time of wealth, righteousness, and peace (17-18)
- The Lord will give Israel everlasting light and remove mourning (19-20)
- Israel will possess the land forever and flourish in it (21-22).

Ezekiel 36 contains a New Covenant prediction that begins by rehearsing the same spiritual benefits listed in Jeremiah 31:34, the passage Paul cited in Romans 11:27. But Ezekiel added a list of physical blessings God promised to national Israel. Verses 33-36 state that when the Lord inaugurates this New Covenant:

- The Lord will cause Israel's cities to be inhabited, and waste places shall be rebuilt.
- Land formerly desolate shall be tilled.
- The land shall become like the garden of Eden.
- Ruined places will be rebuilt and replanted.

The exegetical problem that tarnishes the third supersessionist interpretation of Romans 11:25-32 is the selective incorporation of New Covenant promises. They choose promises that fit their interpretive model and ignore or spiritualize the rest. Romans 11:29 intensifies the problem:

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

¹³ Ibid., 99.

The “calling of God” indisputably refers to God’s election of Israel. But what gifts did Paul have in mind? He answered that question for us in Romans 9:4-5 (referenced above):

*⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.
⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.*

The covenants and promises made for the patriarchs are irrevocable gifts God gave to specifically to Israel. There is no exegetically plausible way to both affirm the statement of v. 29 and simultaneously alter (or sometimes nullify) the content of God’s covenant promises directed to a specific covenant people.

IV. “Use” of the doctrine

Many evangelicals emerged from the second half of the 20th century afflicted with prophecy fatigue. Decades of overemphasis on supposed end-time “signs,” sensationalism, and failed predictions dulled the popular appetite for eschatology. Others were left confused, never able to navigate the arguments for or against millennial positions, Tribulation details, rapture timing, etc. Large numbers of 21st century believers settled into a kind of eschatological agnosticism. “We will find out when we get there,” they say with a disinterested shrug.

One must ask, does the doctrine of this passage really matter? Does the knowledge of this part of God’s plan make a difference in the Christian life today? Surely the apostle Paul did not devote three chapters (9-11) of his *magnum opus* to an insignificant topic! Scripture itself confirms the value of this passage (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Here are two broad ways the preaching and teaching of the doctrinal truth of Romans 11:25-32 should impact our lives and ministries.

- A. An understanding of God’s kingdom plan has a defining effect on the church’s mission.
 - 1. The influence of supersessionism has redefined the mission of local churches.

John Stott helped popularize the idea that God’s promises to Israel were fulfilled in the church. In 1975 he articulated an *incarnational* model of the church’s mission.

The actual [Great] Commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility, unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus.¹⁴

The words of Jesus to which he referred come from Jesus prayer in John 17:18--*As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* Since Jesus healed the sick, so should the church. Jesus fed the hungry, so should the church.

Not all evangelicals were willing to admit that the Church has replaced Israel in God's plan. Yet, over the past 75 years, many evangelicals have tracked the leakage of supersessionism back into their own camps. They embraced the idea that local churches are under obligation to help transform society. To justify this, they concocted an "end around" theological strategy. They simultaneously affirmed that "the kingdom is here, and that it is not here."¹⁵ This opened the floodgates of social programs by collapsing kingdom norms into the present age.

Today, supersessionists and non-supersessionists attempt to unite gospel proclamation with social and ethical transformation in the world. Ostensibly, social action and gospel proclamation hold equal priority. However, history repeatedly shows that things visible and tangible will eventually eclipse the invisible and spiritual. Thus, many churches are up to their steeples in social programs and that reality portends a bleak future.

2. Recognizing that God's kingdom promises await future fulfillment returns the local church to its *proclamational* mission.

Christians are merciful people. *As we have opportunity, [we] do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith* (Galatians 6:10). Deeds of mercy are occasional and incidental expressions of the believer's new life in Christ. They were never meant to define the church's agenda and chart the course for its ministry.

The church is charged with stewardship of a message deployed in the care of souls (2 Timothy 1:12-14; 2:2; 4:1-5).

"Far from being a discussion ancillary to the Gospel and to the Mission of the Church, one's view of the Kingdom of God establishes these matters. It follows, then, that if we are wrong

¹⁴ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

¹⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947), 53.

about the Kingdom, we risk being wrong about almost everything else.”¹⁶

B. Contemplation of God’s mercy has a transforming effect on God’s people.

1. It rebukes our pride

Paul established this goal at the beginning of the paragraph.

Romans 11:25

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers

The mystery undercuts all spiritual pride because it shows that our standing before God rests entirely on mercy, not merit. Consider the humbling analogy of the olive tree.

Romans 11:20–22

²⁰ . . . They [ethnic Israel] were broken off because of their unbelief, but you [Gentiles] 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.

2. It draws us into genuine worship.

Paul’s discussion of the mystery moves in crescendo to the climactic conclusion that displays God’s sovereignty, righteousness, impartiality, and mercy.

Romans 11:32

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

The inscrutable wisdom that undergirds God’s sovereign bestowal of mercy draws from Paul an instinctive exclamation of worship:

Romans 11:33–36

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,

¹⁶ Dr. Mark Snoeberger, “ST752: The Kingdom of God,” (DBTS Course Notes, n.d.), 20

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.*

3. It moves us to full devotion.

The verse that follows Paul’s paean of praise has been the text of many sermons:

Romans 12:1
*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.*

It is a call to full devotion to God (*living sacrifice*). Sermons often connect the appeal with the glories of the gospel presented in Romans 1-11 (*therefore*). But it seems that Paul based his appeal for full devotion on the glories of the gospel presented primarily in the climactic chapters 9-11.

Mercy runs through these three chapters as Paul’s gospel theme. He uses two different words that fall within the same semantic domain, translated mercy and compassion.¹⁷ Neither word appears in chapters 1-8, but the theme appears frequently thereafter. The former term has to do with deeds of kindness extended to those who have done nothing to deserve kindness. The latter describes the affection that moves the one who acts with kindness.

Paul cites God’s words to Moses near the beginning of chapter 9.

Romans 9:15–16
¹⁵ *For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”* ¹⁶ *So
then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who
has mercy.*

God’s sovereign bestowal of mercy is the subject. Neither Jew nor Gentile has an advantage with God. At the end of the section, we find that both are “locked up” in disobedience so that God can pour out mercy on both—according to times of his choosing (11:32). Neither Jew nor Gentile are the focus of God’s great plan. God himself is the focus.

To him be glory forever and ever, Amen.

¹⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 750. See domain “mercy,” entries 88.76 and 88.80.