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THE MYSTERY OF LOVE

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Romans 11.33-36

The final words that we heard from Paul's letter to the Romans are a marvellous doxology, a hymn of praise to the God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and whose ways are higher than our ways.

That doxology is Paul's heart-felt conclusion to this section of Romans.

Chapters 9 - 11 of Romans deal with God's relationship to the Jewish people.

A superficial reading of Romans might lead us to the conclusion

that this is an incidental section which can easily be skipped over;

we can jump from chapter 8 to chapter 12 without losing anything.

But that's not really the case. This section is necessary.

Without it, the marvellous promise at the end of Romans 8.

that nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love,
would be empty and hollow.

The theme of the letter to the Romans is righteousness.

It deals with the question, how can a human being be righteous before God?

To understand that question, we have to look at the meaning of righteous.

Righteous is not a synonym for good or for religious.

To be righteous means to be in a right relationship with God,

a relationship in which we acknowledge God as our sovereign Creator and Lord
and in which we experience the wonderful love of God.

Such a right relationship with God is not something which we humans deserve
or which we can earn in any way.

On the contrary, righteousness is a gift which God freely offers to us.

It is a gift which comes to us through Jesus Christ, God's chosen servant and representative, whose life, death, and resurrection fling open the door to the Father's house

so that we can see God standing there with arms wide open
calling us to come and share the banquet
God has prepared to welcome us home.

Righteousness is a gift. It is freely given.

It cannot be earned or purchased; it can only be received.

And it is received by faith, by trusting God and believing

that God's promise is honest and sincere and has our names on it!

That's always the way it has been, Paul says.

Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish people, was made righteous
because he believed the promises of God.

And we are made righteous in the same way.
That changes our lives, for we now live within the circle of God's love
and experience God's love working powerfully in our lives.

We have eternal life through Jesus Christ as a present reality,
for we experience God's love day by day.
We live in God, and God lives in us.
And while we still struggle with the selfish habits of our old life
and do not perfectly reflect the love of God as we ought to and want to,
We experience God's loving presence,
for the Spirit of God dwells within our hearts.
All that leads to Paul's wonderful statement at the end of Romans 8:
"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation.
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

At that point the question of Israel becomes important!
Israel was the chosen people of God,
through whom God worked out his plans and purposes in the world.
Now God had revealed himself in Jesus Christ,
and God's plan and purposes were worked out through Jesus.
But Israel had rejected Jesus.
More and more the church of Jesus Christ was becoming a Gentile church.
It was as if in Jesus Christ the road of God's plan and purposes had taken a turn
and Israel insisted on going straight ahead, off the road and into the wilderness.
And that poses a very important question:
if Israel could do that, how can we be sure that we won't do the same thing?
If Israel separated herself from God's love,
how can we be sure that we won't do the same thing?

Do you see why this question is important?
It's not merely a matter of historical interest.
It deals directly with you and me, with our ability to trust any of the promises of God.
So Paul's answer to this question is extremely important to us.

Paul begins by reminding us that Israel is a chosen people rather than an ethnic group.
Contrary to the prevailing custom which made family lineage and power
pass from father to eldest son,

God chose Isaac, the younger son, rather than the first-born Ishmael
and Jacob, the second-born twin, rather than the first-born Esau.
Again and again God identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
That was a reminder to Israel that their place as God's chosen people
was not by nature but by grace.

God's choice of Israel was a matter of God's free grace.
God loved Israel not because of anything they were or did, but only because he loved them.
Israel's mistake lay in trying to earn righteousness, to deserve a right relationship with
God. But righteousness comes by grace, as a free gift, not by our attempts to earn it.
If we try to earn righteousness by our goodness or our religiousness,
we are denying the unconditional love of God.

**Righteousness is given freely by God, as a gift without strings attached,
and is received only when we believe God's offer and walk into God's open arms.**

But while Israel's mistake has meant
that she has spurned the love of God offered in Jesus Christ,
that does not mean that God has rejected her!
After all, Paul says, I am a Jew. And there are other Jews in the church.
It's like the situation in the time of Elijah, when the prophet complained to God
that he was the only one serving the Lord and his countrymen were trying to kill
him. God answered, "I have reserved 7000 who have not worshipped the foreign god
Baal."
God had a remnant then, and God had a remnant in Paul's time,
and God has a remnant now.

But even this was part of God's loving plan.
If the Jews had all accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ,
the Gentiles might never have been included.
It took some special actions of God to convince the early church
that God's plan in Jesus Christ meant
that the Gentiles would also receive the blessing of Abraham.
In Jesus Christ, God's promises to Abraham
that all the nations would be blessed in him became a reality.
For that to happen, Israel had to be by-passed for a time.

Let me be very clear:
that gives Gentile Christians no right to despise the Jews.
There is no place at all for anti-Semitism in the church of Jesus Christ, the Jewish
Messiah. It would be possible for God also to remove us from the church
and restore the Jews to their former place as the only people of God.
But God's plan is that we Gentiles should also be God's people

and that, in *God's* time and *God's* way, the Jews should be restored by grace.
The whole point of Paul's argument is that righteousness is always the free gift of God.
All of *God's* dealings with Israel flowed from *God's* love,
and *God's* love for Israel will be fully displayed when *God's* time arrives.

We can sum up Paul's argument in his own words,
"For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."
God wants it to be crystal clear that the privilege of living within the warmth of *God's* love
is not something that we have to earn;

it is the gift of *God's* love.

God loves us because of *God's* own loving nature, not because we are so loveable.

And nothing in *God's* great plan of redemption has any other foundation
than that amazing, persistent, unchanging love of *God*.

Because of that, you and I can hear Paul's assurance that nothing in all creation
can separate us from the love of *God* in Christ Jesus our Lord
and know that Paul is absolutely right.

God loves us.

God loves you and me.

God will never stop loving us.

And *God* will always keep us near to himself.

Does that make the whole thing crystal clear? Certainly not!

That leads to Paul's doxology.

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of *God*!

How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!"

We are not *God's* equals, so that we can understand the mind of the Lord.

No! "From *God* and through *God* and to *God* are all things. To *God* be the glory forever."

That is the cry of a heart that has become intoxicated with the love of *God*.

That is the cry of a heart that knows the greatness of its Lover
and rejoices to praise its Beloved.

That cry of devotion and praise comes from one who knows
that nothing in all creation will separate him from *God's* love.

May our hearts join in that cry this morning,

so that all our praise may be given to the *God* who loves us and will always love us,
the *God* and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May each one of us open our hearts to the love of *God* in Jesus Christ.

May each one of us echo that cry in our own hearts,
to *God's* glory and to our blessing. Amen.