



The Book of
ROMANS

Small Group Study 3: Romans 9-11

Week Five: Romans 11:11–36

Key Verses

- “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? And who has ever given to God, that he should be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.” - Romans 11:33–36 (CSB)

Key Principles

- As we consider God’s sovereignty in salvation, our hearts should turn to humble and joyful worship.
- God was, and is, bringing Jews and Gentiles together in the gospel.
- God’s very inclusion of the Gentiles will lead to the salvation of the Jews.
- Humility and trust should be our response as we consider God’s kindness to us in Christ.
- Just as Gentiles experienced God’s mercy after a time of disobedience, Israel will also receive mercy after their disobedience.

Read

What brings your heart to a place of worship? Your favorite song? An answered prayer? These are all good things. But above all else, God wants our worship to be informed by who he is and what he has done. The goodness of his character should move us to praise his name. Meditating on these things—God’s Word and his ways—should lift our hearts to joyful adoration of God. This is exactly where we find Paul in Romans 11. As Paul concludes his explanation of God’s unsearchable plan, he cannot help but burst into worship.

So, what is it from Romans 9–11 that brings Paul to a place of worship? God’s faithfulness. The central theme of Romans 9–11 was stated at the beginning: “It is not as though the word of God has failed” (Romans 9:6). Previously, God had made promises of salvation to Israel, and yet, many Israelites did not experience salvation in Christ. We discussed in Week One that, at first glance, it seems that Israel’s present unbelief brings God’s faithfulness into question. How did

Paul defend God's faithfulness? He showed from the Old Testament that salvation was never promised to every single ethnic Israelite. Not every ethnic Israelite is chosen. True Israel was never determined by family lineage or their works. Many Israelites who resisted the gospel made the error of trying to pursue righteousness through works of the law, instead of faith in Christ (Romans 10:1-4). Thus, there was a preserved group—a remnant—of Israel that believed in Christ. (Romans 11:1-7)

Paul could have ended his argument here, but he doesn't. Paul continues because the story of Israel isn't over. The last word cannot be that Israel is doomed to hardened hearts. The majority of Israel will not always continue to resist the gospel. For now, Israel has been temporarily calloused to the gospel so that the fullness of the Gentiles may enter into the family of God (Romans 11:25). But the inclusion of the Gentiles will eventually provoke Israel to jealousy and lead to their salvation (Romans 11:14).

Paul's line of reasoning here raises many questions about ethnic Jews today. Is Paul claiming that all ethnic Jews will become Christians? Or is he referring, instead, to the "true Israel" he introduced in Romans 9:6? Commentators differ about who precisely Paul is talking about in his references to "Israel" in this passage. (And we would do well to allow for various interpretations ourselves.) But one thing is clear: God is not done with Israel.

Paul uses the illustration of an olive tree to explain God's plan for both Jews and Gentiles. Once again, Paul borrows an image from the Old Testament (Jeremiah 11:16-17; Hosea 14:6; Isaiah 5:1-7). As gardeners already know, it is possible—and common—to move a branch from one tree to another. This process is called grafting. The way Paul uses the image in Romans 11, the root of the tree represents the patriarchs, while the branches are the descendants (11:16). The natural branches refer to the Jews, while the wild branches refer to the Gentiles (11:17-24). The natural branches (Jews) were broken off, so the wild branches (Gentiles) could be grafted into the tree of God's people.

However, in 11:17–22, Paul warns the Gentiles that their inclusion is no reason for them to boast. A Gentile cannot say, “God rejected Israel and saved us Gentiles because we are better!” Salvation is by God’s choice and not because of something in us. As we marvel at God’s sovereign choice, may we all remember Paul’s warning to the Gentiles (Romans 11:20–22). Pride has no place in the heart of God’s people. **Humility and trust should be our response as we consider God’s kindness to us in Christ.** As Paul tells the Gentiles, we must continue to trust God and not ourselves.

Romans 11:30–32 gives a great summary of Paul’s argument. **Just as Gentiles experienced God’s mercy after a time of disobedience, Israel will also receive mercy after their disobedience.** God does this to show his mercy. We can find rest in the fact that God has orchestrated all of his ways in order to magnify his glory and his mercy!

Overcome by the weight of God’s faithfulness, Paul overflows into worship. But Paul doesn’t just mention vague phrases of praise, he adores God for specific aspects of his character and deeds. Paul praises the depth and richness of God’s wisdom and knowledge. He praises God for his supreme nature; the fact that God’s judgments and ways are far above and beyond us (Romans 11:33). God’s mind is incomparable; no one can understand it. God’s actions are always right; no one can instruct him. God is never in debt; no one can give God anything that isn’t already his. Because all things are from him, through him, and to him—all glory belongs to God forever.

For Paul, his thoughts about God lead him to worship God. In this sense, some might say Paul’s rich understanding of God has turned into praise for God: his theology has transformed into doxology. As one pastor states:

Our study of God and his ways among us should turn our hearts to music. The term theology produces in the mind of the man on the street visions of damp libraries and musty tomes and somber monasteries. Instead, theology should suggest light and dancing! And that is what our present passage should do for us. Formally stated, Romans 11:33–36 identifies the proper response of our hearts to God’s sovereign working.

Any person who truly appropriates something of Paul’s response in these verses will experience a marked increase in joy.²

It's only appropriate that we end our study of Romans 9–11 with a hymn of praise. As you reflect on these words from William Cowper, pray that God would lead your heart to praise as you consider his sovereign ways.³

God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform;
he plants his footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill
he treasures up his bright designs,
and works his sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage
take; the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break
in blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence
he hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding ev'ry hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
and he will make it plain.

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question *before* your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points. Then, read Romans 11:11– 36 in preparation for this week's study.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 202–204.
³ William Cowper, "God Moves In A Mysterious Way." Public Domain.

Highlight

What questions does Paul ask in Romans 11:11–36? What answers (if any) does he give in these verses?

How many times does Paul mention Jews (or Israel)? Gentiles?

What direct commands does Paul give in Romans 11:11–36?

What Old Testament quotes does Paul reference?

Explain

According to Romans 11:11–36, what was the good purpose for which God hardened many Israelites?

What are the reasons that the Gentiles should not be conceited (11:20)? How are they instructed to fight this conceit (11:22)?

What does Paul say is going to happen to ethnic Israelites in the future (11:25–27)?

In your own words, rewrite the questions from Romans 11:34–35 and turn them into sentences.

Apply

What are some ways you can grow in regularly obeying the command to “consider God’s kindness and severity” (11:22)?

Does thinking about God’s election make you more prideful and argumentative? What are some things in this passage that can help you remain humble and joyful?

How often does thinking deeply about God’s Word move you to worship? What are some ways you can grow in this habit and practice it regularly?

It is a good practice to meditate on God’s character until our heart sings with praise. What are some truths we learn about God in Romans 11:32–36? What are some ways to regularly bring these truths to mind in your everyday life?

Respond in Prayer

Each week of this study guide will include a recommended Scripture passage that helps us focus on the faithfulness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected passage and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this passage on your own at home *and* together with your small group.

This Week's Prayer Passage: Romans 11:33–36

Read Romans 11:33–36

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Praise the “depth of the riches both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God” (Romans 11:33). Consider how “unsearchable” and “untraceable” God’s ways are (11:33).
- **Confession:** Confess to God your low thoughts of him. Ask him to forgive you for all the times you have wrongly believed that he needed your wisdom in running the world (11:34–35).
- **Thanksgiving:** What has God graciously given you? Thank God for every good gift you have in your life, “for from him and through him and to him are *all things*” (11:36). Consider God’s greatest gift of all, his own Son (Romans 8:32). Thank God for giving us Jesus Christ.
- **Supplication:** Ask the Father to grant you a heart that regularly bursts into praise toward him (11:33). Pray that God would grant you more joy in Christ than all his other gifts. Pray that God would give you the boldness to speak of his greatness to others who do not yet know him.