The reason Paul stresses that the Jews are at least partly to blame for rejecting the gospel is that he wishes to insist that salvation depends on God's mercy to sinners. For Paul salvation must be a gift; otherwise we could brag. Consequently, as he will stress later, all must be culpably disobedient so that God may grant mercy to everyone (11:32).

Questions for reflection:

Do you think that the people you know who reject the Christian message are being "contrary" or merely have not yet received God's "call"? Are these options mutually exclusive? Do you think that one day they will receive God's mercy and begin to believe the gospel? Why or why not? Do you believe that God can use your own past mistakes to help save you?

36. Romans 11:1–24

Now I ask, did God reject his people? Certainly not, for I am also an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham of the tribe of Benjamin. "God did not reject his people" [Psal. 94:14] whom he chose long ago. Or do you not know what scripture says in the passage about Elijah, when he appeals to God against Israel? "Lord, they murdered your prophets, demolished your altars; only I am left, and they seek to slay me" [1 Kings 19:10,14]. But what is God's response to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not knelt before Baal" [cf. 1 Kings 19:18]. Similarly, at the present time also, there is a remnant by God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it no longer depends on good deeds, since if it did, it would not be by grace. (11:1–6)

What is the point? Israel did not obtain what it was searching for. The ones God chose obtained it, but the rest were blinded. Just as it is written, "God put them into a stupor. Their eyes could not see, and their ears could not hear until the present day" [cf.
Deut. 29:4; Isa. 29:10]. And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap and a stumbling block and a retribution for them. Let their eyes become dark so they cannot see and make their backs bend continually” [Psalm 69:22-23]. (11:7–10)

So I ask, they did not stumble to be ruined, did they? Certainly not. But by their misstep, there is salvation for the Gentiles to make the Jews jealous. But if their misstep brought riches to the world, and their defeat, riches to the Gentiles, how much more will their inclusion accomplish? I am speaking to you Gentiles. But to the extent that I am a missionary to the Gentiles, I praise my own ministry hoping somehow to make my kin jealous and save some of them. For if their rejection led to the reconciliation of the world with God, what will their acceptance lead to, if not life from the dead? If the first of the dough is holy, the entire batch is too. If the root is holy, the branches are too. If some of the branches were broken off and you, who were a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them and share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not brag about being superior to the branches. Even if you do brag, it is not you who support the root, but the root supports you. You will reply, “The branches were broken off that I myself might be grafted in.” True. They were broken off because of their unbelief, and you yourself stand by faith. Do not be conceited; rather be afraid. If God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you either. Note God’s kindness and severity, severity toward those who have fallen away, but God’s kindness toward you, if you remain responsive to that kindness; otherwise you too will be cut out. And they, if they do not persist in disbelief, will be grafted in. For God is able to graft them back in. If you who naturally were part of a wild olive tree were cut out from it and were grafted into a cultivated olive, although it is not natural to do this, how much more natural will it be for them to be grafted into their own olive tree? (11:11–24)

A major theme in Paul’s theology is that we must receive God through one another. No one comes to God alone. Instead, we come to God together, and we receive God’s
blessings from each other. Thus, in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul stresses that each person has a unique constellation of gifts, and it is only by being a community that all the gifts become available to everyone and the church becomes the body of Christ. Similarly, in the beginning of Romans Paul stresses that he and his readers can be encouraged by each other’s faith (Rom. 1:12).

Here Paul applies the principle of receiving God through one another by emphasizing that presently both Jews and Gentiles receive the gospel from the other.

Thus, on the one hand, Paul stresses that the Gentiles are totally dependent on the Jews for the gospel. Christianity is rooted in Judaism, and Paul pointedly reminds his Gentile readers that the root supports them. Indeed, Paul notes that, despite the fact that he is a missionary to the Gentiles, he is himself a Jew.

Paul even claims that the very failure of Jews to believe benefited the Gentiles. It was because the majority of Jews rejected the gospel that Christianity came to the Pagans. Presumably, what Paul means is that the church placed increasing emphasis on preaching to Gentiles when the Jewish mission was not very successful. According to Acts, when Paul himself arrived in a new city, he normally preached in the local synagogue, then got thrown out, and, as a result, concentrated thereafter on converting Gentiles. Perhaps in this passage Paul is also alluding to the fact that the Gentiles were more attracted to Christianity once they realized that it was not primarily a Jewish movement.

If, however, the past failure of the Jews to believe has been a benefit to the Gentiles, Paul stresses that the Gentiles will benefit even more from the future faith of the Jewish community. If their rejection was a blessing to Gentiles, their coming inclusion in the church will be nothing less than new life for the entire world.

Nevertheless, if the Gentiles are dependent on the Jews, the Jews are dependent on the Gentiles, and in the future the Jews will become Christians because of them. The large number of conversions among the Gentiles will eventually make the
Jews take notice and become jealous and convert to Christianity themselves. Paul stresses that it would be especially easy for Jews to be grafted back into the religious movement that originated in their own culture and which takes many of the ancient achievements of that culture for granted. It is easy to graft a branch back into its own tree. Presumably, the reason the Jews will become jealous is that they will see that the Gentile Christians are more righteous and more filled with God’s Spirit than they are and, indeed, have achieved the goodness the Law demands—the very goodness that according to Paul the Jews pursued without success.

Of course, by stressing that the two ethnic groups receive the gospel through one another Paul is inviting his readers to remember that no one is in a position to be smug. The Gentile Christians at Rome cannot be smug because their faith came from Jews, and the Jewish Christians cannot be smug because the best hope for mass conversions of their compatriots must come through the Gentiles.

The fact that we can receive the gospel only by trusting in God’s undeserved goodness in sending Jesus also makes it impossible for either group to be smug. Gentile Christians must be humble because they stand only through faith, and it is precisely the fact that we can only receive salvation by trusting in God’s gift of Jesus that non-Christian Jews now need to learn.

Today Paul’s claim that Jewish and Gentile Christianity both depend on each other seems even truer than when Paul was writing. All the arguments for the historical dependence of Gentile Christianity on ancient Judaism remain valid. Christianity originated as a movement within Judaism. In addition, Paul’s arguments for the dependence of Jewish Christianity on the Gentiles have grown stronger. In Paul’s day there still was a continuing stream of Jewish Christianity of which Paul himself was a part. In subsequent centuries, however, Jewish Christianity died out. Hence, today all Jewish Christians ultimately get their faith from Gentiles who preserved the Christian heritage. Accordingly, Paul’s emphasis that neither Christian group is in a position to be arrogant seems even more apt than when he wrote it.
Nevertheless, in keeping with the overall structure of the letter, Paul here addresses the Gentiles and especially insists that they must be humble and charitable toward their Jewish brothers and sisters. Whereas in the first half of Romans, Paul addresses the Jews as "you" and reminds them that they are no better than the Gentiles (2:17–27; cf. 7:1), here Paul states, "I am speaking to you Gentiles." To be sure, thereafter when Paul uses "you," he uses the singular. Consequently, he is not directly addressing the Gentiles in the Roman church, but a generic Gentile, just as Paul addressed a generic Jew in chapter 2. Nevertheless, since Paul is addressing a representative Gentile, the Gentiles in the congregation surely realized that his words were especially directed at them. Paul reminds us that our faith comes only as a gift, a gift that was not given to many Jews. Hence, we should be grateful for God's kindness to us and never take it for granted. Indeed, Paul stresses that God blinded many Jews precisely so we could be saved.

Of course, by emphasizing that Gentile Christians should not boast against Jews, Paul hopes to win the support of Jewish Christians. They would be especially appreciative of this warning.

To help win the support of the Jews at Rome and any other Christian Jews who might hear about the letter, Paul keeps stressing in this section that he is Jewish himself and is concerned about Jews. Paul insists that he is a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. He hopes that his mission to the Gentiles will ultimately lead to the conversion of his natural brothers and sisters.

In modern times the relationship between European Christianity and Christianity elsewhere has been strangely similar to the relationship between first century Christian Jews and Gentiles that Paul describes. Thus, most Christianity in the modern world ultimately came from Europe. While, of course, there are surviving ancient Christian communities in such places as Ethiopia and India, the vast majority of Christians in Africa and Asia, to say nothing of the New World, owe their faith to missionaries from the West. Nevertheless, after Europe sent out wave after wave of missionaries, its own faith declined. Today Western
Europe is among the least religious areas in the world. At the same time, in many places in the Developing Nations, Christianity has exploded. There are millions of new Christians and an immense enthusiasm for the faith. In important ways Christianity in the Developing Nations has even begun to revitalize Western Christianity. Thus, for example, liberation theology is a movement that started in the Developing Nations (especially, Latin America) but has had an increasing impact on the churches in Europe and North America.

Perhaps, then, we should at present ponder Paul's claim that we, as different Christian ethnic groups, must acknowledge our need for one another. The churches in the Developing Nations must never forget that they are indebted to the West for Christianity. The European Christians must realize that they have somehow lost the cutting edge of the faith and may need to learn from Christians elsewhere.

Questions for reflection:

Would it greatly affect your religious life if one ethnic group in the Church could claim superiority because everyone else had received Christianity from it? How would you feel if you were part of this "superior" group? How would you feel if you were not? Do you prefer a Church where different ethnic groups get their Christianity from one another? Is Paul going too far to claim that God deliberately caused some people not to believe in order that such equality would be possible? What do you think your Christian group can learn from Christian communities elsewhere?

37. Romans 11:25-31

Brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be ignorant about this mystery, lest you think you are more intelligent than you are. The partial blindness came on Israel until the full number of Gentiles
converts. And so, all Israel will be saved, just as it is written, “The rescuer will come out of Zion. This will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins” [cf. Isa. 59:20–21]. For your sake they are enemies of the good news, but for the sake of the Patriarchs they are beloved because of their election. God’s gift and summons are irrevocable. Just as formerly you yourselves disobeyed God but now have received mercy through their disobedience, so they too now have been disobedient to the mercy you received so that they themselves might also now receive mercy. (11:25–31)

Paul insists that Jesus will eventually save all Jews when he returns. Of course, Paul does not explain how this mass conversion will occur. Nevertheless, it is relatively clear that it will not primarily be through the efforts of Christian missionaries. Instead, Jesus (the rescuer from Zion) will in the end convert his compatriots and thus fulfill God’s promise concerning the chosen people.

Consequently, Paul is able to maintain both that salvation is only through Jesus and yet that all will be saved. People can only come to God fully through his Son. Yet, in their present missionary efforts Christians will not convert everyone. Nevertheless, God has a plan for every person’s and every group’s life, and in his own time will save all whom he has made.

As so often in this letter, Paul stresses that salvation is primarily due to the initiative of God, which cannot be thwarted. It is God who provides the gift of salvation, and his call is irrevocable.

Today an especially attractive feature of this section of the epistle is that Paul insists that the Jewish community has a continuing place in God’s plan. Unlike subsequent anti-Semitic Christian theology, Paul does not say that the Christian Church has simply replaced the ethnic Jewish community as the recipient of God’s mercies. Instead, because of their heritage God still has a special relationship with the Jews and a plan to save them.

Once again Paul tells the Gentiles not to despise Jews. Paul warns his Gentile readers not to think that they are more intelligent than they are. Instead, they must resist the temptation of
thinking they are somehow more perceptive than the unbelieving Jews whose coming redemption Paul is discussing.

Questions for reflection:

Do you believe that God intends to save everyone and that salvation is only fully available through Jesus? If so, how will God save those who die without being Christian? If not, do you believe that God only intends to save some people or that one can come to a full relationship with God without knowing that God shared our human life in Jesus?

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38. Romans 11:32

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience in order that he might grant mercy to all. (11:32)

As Paul begins to conclude this section (chapters 9–11), he states the principle which underlies his argument as a whole, namely, that God providentially decreed that all would disobey in order that all might receive his mercy. Initially God chose only the Jews and decreed that the Gentiles would disobey temporarily. Nevertheless, God was not being callous. Instead, he was looking forward to the coming of Jesus who would offer salvation to the Gentiles. Now that such salvation has come and the Gentiles are receiving the gospel, God is decreeing that most Jews will disobey temporarily. Nevertheless, God is looking forward to a time when the Jews will realize their need for his mercy and will also receive the gospel.

Paul assumes that, because there is only one God, salvation can only come through his mercy. Since God is the sole creator and redeemer, salvation can only come through his unmerited kindness. Of course, salvation itself primarily consists in a relationship of loving trust in God’s goodness. Hence,
any effort to compel God to save us—even if that effort comes through striving to perform good deeds—is futile.

In this passage Paul makes it clear that he believes that God intends to save everyone ultimately. Earlier in his argumentation Paul emphasized human disobedience and God’s judgment, and it would have been easy for the reader to assume that God decreed that some people would be eternally condemned. Here, by contrast, Paul makes it clear that God intends to save everyone through Jesus. Indeed, God even overlooks past sins (cf. 3:25–26) in order that he can show compassion to everyone. Temporarily people must experience God’s just judgment and suffer appropriately, but in the end God will save all people.

Questions for reflection:

Is it easy to believe that God will be merciful to others? Is it easy to believe that God will be merciful to us? Do we live as if there really is only one God and that our relationship to him must begin by accepting his mercy?


Oh, the depth of God’s wealth and wisdom and knowledge. His decisions are unfathomable and his ways beyond understanding. For “who has known the Lord’s plan, or who has been his adviser” [Isa. 40:13], “or who has given him anything that repayment should be made?” [Cf. Job 41:11]. Because all things are from him and through him and for him. To him be glory forever! Amen. (11:33–36)

Even though he has attempted to interpret God’s plan, Paul confesses that God’s doings are mysterious. God’s decisions are unfathomable; his ways are beyond understanding.
Paul supports his claim that God's actions are incomprehensible by citing a section from Isaiah.

The reason that Paul can be so confident that he has correctly interpreted God's basic plan despite God's inscrutability is that God is the Lord of all things. In concluding the long argument that began in 9:1, Paul emphasizes that God is the universal master. He is the maker and sustainer and goal of all things. Consequently, ultimately all will come to salvation and will do so through God's invincible mercy. Any other result would be incompatible with God's might and compassion. Indeed, so great is God's power and so deep is his love that he even uses the sin and disobedience of human beings to promote their ultimate salvation.

As he reflects on who God is and what God has done and will do, Paul breaks into praise. The God who is the source and goal of all things must be glorified.

Of course, glorifying God overcomes all sin. Paul began the epistle's long theological presentation by emphasizing in chapter 1 that the Gentiles originally went astray because they were not willing to praise and thank God. Now Paul ends his argument by breaking into praise and by implying that ultimately all things will join in this doxology. All things are from God and for him, and, hence, ultimately, all things will glorify him.

As he praises God, Paul employs both Greek and Jewish religious rhetoric to emphasize that God will save both ethnic groups. Thus, terms like "wealth," "wisdom," and "knowledge" are typical of Greek religious discourse. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 1:22 Paul himself declares, "Greeks seek wisdom." By contrast, stressing that God's "ways" are beyond understanding sounds like the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 45:15, 55:8). Similarly, the statement that all things are "from," "through," and "for" God sounds like Greek philosophy. Indeed, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul reminded the Philosophers of Athens that the Greek poets taught that we are God's children and have our being through him (Acts 17:28). The statement that no one has given advice to God is biblical (Isa. 40:13).
Of course, this mixing of Greek and Jewish religious traditions would have appealed to the mixed congregation and made Paul sound like a peacemaker.

The doxology signals that Paul’s theological presentation is basically over. This long and powerful acclamation of God’s greatness is a literary climax and suggests that Paul has now finished the prolonged theological argument that began in chapter 1.

Questions for reflection:

Can we affirm that God’s ways are mysterious and yet make fundamental observations about what God must be doing if he is loving and is the only God? Does praising God cause us to think about him differently? What are the implications for everyday life of the claim that all things come from God and exist for him?

40. Romans 12:1–2

Paul turns to exhortation. In the previous eleven chapters he focused on doctrine. For the next few chapters, by contrast, he will give practical advice on daily living. To be sure, Paul has occasionally given practical advice already (e.g., 6:12–14), and the distinction between doctrine and exhortation which is so natural for us to make today was not as clear in the first century. Nevertheless, there is a discernible change in tone beginning at 12:1.

As we shall see, however, chapters 12–15 will continue Paul’s balanced treatment of the relationship of Jews and Gentiles. In chapters 1–8 Paul stressed that God’s salvation is for the Greek as well as the Jew and, therefore, Jews must not judge Gentiles. Then in chapters 9–11 Paul stressed that God originally chose the Jews and especially intends to save them