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Romans

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. Romans 11:25

Once again Paul introduces his thought with "For..." This will be given to expand on what he said early about "how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?" The "natural branches" are the Jewish people. Verse 24 hinted that they will be brought back into the spiritual graces of God; verse 25 shows us this explicitly.

In order to convey this notion, he is going to use several key words to highlight the important nature of what is being relayed - "ignorant," "mystery," "wise," "blindness," and "fullness." And so he begins with "For I do not desire..." this is an introduction to tell us that what he is about to say is important. He states it in the negative to highlight what he in fact does desire.

"Brethren" is declared to show us that this is a matter which is directed to the body of believers. It is this group, his "brethren" which he desires to impart this important knowledge to. As this is an epistle intended for the duration of the church age, Paul's use of "brethren" then includes us, even to this day. It is not something which is fulfilled yet.

"That you should be ignorant" is a particular phrase that Paul uses to stress the importance of knowing, comprehending, and accepting a particular point. To see other such matters which Paul deems likewise important, refer to Romans 1:13; 1 Corinthians 10:1 & 12:1; 2 Corinthians 1:8; and 1 Thessalonians 4:13. In this case, we are asked to not be ignorant of a particular "mystery."

In the New Testament, a "mystery" is something which was hidden in ages past, but is now revealed. Explaining a mystery doesn't necessarily mean that it is yet fulfilled, such as in the case of this verse, but that it is disclosed to now understand what will someday come about. The rapture is an excellent example of such a mystery (see 1 Corinthians 15:51). Concerning the Jews, the Gentiles, the Church Age, and the Kingdom Age, Paul will now reveal this mystery.

Next he states the reason for the mystery's disclosure - "lest you (meaning the gentiles) should be wise in your own opinion." This is referring back to the overall thought of verses 19-24. We are not to be haughty over the Jews because we are wild branches grafted into the holy tree. They are natural branches. We can easily be broken off again; they can easily be grafted in again. Etc. Because of these things, we are not to be wise in our own opinion.

And the explanation for this is because "blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." It is a lot of information, but the key word here is "until." There is something future to the time of Paul's writings, and even future to us now (as explained above concerning epistles intended for the church age) which is relevant to his discourse on the state of Jewish believers. "Blindness in part" shows us that it is only a portion of the whole. Be it a large portion or a small portion, there are exemptions. "Has happened..." explains that the blindness pertains to Israel in part and that it was in effect at the time of Paul's letter; a time very early in the church age and even prior to the destruction of the temple and the dispersion of the Jews.

"Until" shows us that this blindness will continue unabated for a specific amount of time. When that time is reached, then the partial blindness of Israel will end. And that will come about when "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." The

fullness of the gentiles is speaking of a set duration of time and a set number of people.

God is building a temple, with people as "living stones" in that temple. An architect plans the construction of a building to the minutest detail: dimensions, amount of materials, placement of things, time until completion, etc. God, who is infinitely wise, has every aspect of His temple contemplated. When the set portion of gentiles are brought into the fold, there will be a removal of the blinders from the Jewish people.

The "fullness of the Gentiles" is not the same as the "times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) although there is an overlapping of the two. The times of the Gentiles began when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, razed the temple, and exiled the Jews to Babylon. Since then, foreign powers have ruled over Jerusalem. This has continued until today. Even though Jerusalem is under Jewish control, the Temple Mount remains under the authority of the Muslims. And though a temple will again be built on the Temple Mount which will exist through the Tribulation Period (Revelation 11:1, 2), there will still be a defiling Gentile element to it. This is probably referring to the Al Aqsa Mosque which is there now and which may continue to stand side-by-side with the temple.

In contrast, the "fullness of the Gentiles" is speaking of the Church Age and the grafting in of Gentile believers. Although this technically began at Pentecost as is recorded in Acts 2, it actually started in Acts 8 with the Holy Spirit coming upon those in Samaria and in Acts 10 with the conversion of the household of Cornelius. It really picked up steam at the calling of Paul and with the introduction of His ministry. These key passages in Acts show the transition of the focus from the Jews to the Gentiles.

Life application: No, prophecy isn't fulfilled and the church hasn't replaced Israel.

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

“The Deliverer will come out of Zion,

And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;... Romans 11:26

Care and context need to be taken when considering Romans 11:26; care in interpretation of the word "all" in particular, and context as derived from the preceding verses. Without this, many have gone ahead making unfounded assumptions and claims. Paul has just revealed a mystery; a point which was not known until it was disclosed by him. That mystery was "that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in."

This is known to us now because Paul revealed it. Because we know this, and because we have 2000 years of church history behind us, we can make unfounded assumptions such as inserting the church, or a sect of the church, into this verse. But the context demands that Paul is speaking about the broken off branches which are Israel; the Jewish people.

Secondly, "all" does not always mean "all" in the ultimate sense. One of countless such examples is found in Mark 1:5 -

"Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins."

Twice in this verse, it says "all." All from Judea and Jerusalem went out and were baptized by John the Baptist. Just imagine the lines! But in Luke 7:30 it says this -

"But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him."

So,,, not "all" were really baptized by John the Baptist. "All" meant something other than "every single person." Instead, it was intended as hyperbole. It was given to show the magnificent number of people who heard and responded; the lines were long, but not everyone was in them. This type of wording is to be found throughout the Bible and on numerous occasions. Even with such words as "all" and "every" there must be a consideration of intent and of context.

Therefore, when Paul says, "And so all Israel will be saved..." it must be taken in such a light. He has already shown that "branches were broken off." This state has continued for 2000 years. None of the broken off branches are saved. Nor are any which remain separated from the holy root at this time. Nor will those branches be saved which haven't been re-grafted in during the tribulation period. "All Israel" is speaking of a specific time in the future. And Paul shows us when this will be in his citing of Isaiah 59:20 -

"The Redeemer will come to Zion,
And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,'
Says the Lord."

After the time of the "fullness of the Gentiles" and upon completion of the "times of the Gentiles" Jesus will return to Israel and deliver them. Zechariah 12 details this and it is only speaking of Israel the people in Israel the land. The church was still a mystery at the time of Zechariah's writings; a mystery not fully understood even at the time of the ascension of Christ. At that momentous event, we see the following discourse between the apostles and Jesus -

"Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' And He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.'" Acts 1:6, 7

Even after their forty days of instruction from the Lord, the apostles were still thinking of and expecting the Kingdom Age when Christ would rule from Zion. This

is a specific time which is detailed throughout the Old Testament, but is highlighted, for example, in passages such as Isaiah 2:2-4 -

"Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the Lord's house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And all nations shall flow to it.
Many people shall come and say,
'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways,
And we shall walk in His paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
And rebuke many people;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore."

Jesus didn't tell the apostles that they had misinterpreted those verses. Nor did He tell them that the church now assumed this role. They expected Israel to be the head of the nations and the law to go forth from her and Jesus didn't correct them on this; it remained an unchanged tenet of their belief system. Instead of correcting them, Jesus merely told them to get about the business of spreading the gospel and leave times and dates to the Father.

The New Covenant, promised to Israel in Jeremiah 31:31, will be realized on a national scale at some point in the future, but there are still seven years allocated to Israel (see Daniel 9:24-27) before this occurs where they will live under law. All Israel will be saved in the sense that the nation will be delivered at Christ's second coming. They will triumph over their enemies and the world will enter a new age and a new dispensation (see Revelation 19 for the exciting details).

Life application: When reading the Bible, context and intent must be considered. Proper application of these and other principles will ensure a right understanding of what God is doing in human history. Running ahead without such care can only lead to confusion and even heresy.