

Welcome back to our series on Romans! This week we are on chapter 11 so we are pretty much two thirds of the way through the book. Once again, when I read the passage I was looking at it and thinking “why on earth has Jonny done this to me!” Romans has such a huge amount of deep, complex themes running through it that it has been a real challenge each week for me to try to get my head around what the Apostle Paul is talking about, and to try to get enough of an understanding of his theme that I can try to speak on it in a sermon. I hope, with God's grace, that He will allow me to do so in a useful way today.

Romans 11 is a big chapter - not simply because of the verse count – but because of the theme Paul discusses, that is predestination. To give a bit of context around why I find predestination difficult I need to tell you about some friends I had as a teenager and in my early 20s. I was heavily involved in my own church and youth fellowship at that stage, but when I was about 18 and just finished A levels I got involved with an associated organisation, Young Life. It was a kind of interdenominational Youth Fellowship which challenged young people to become more committed to Christ. Nothing scary about that! Where my trauma around predestination comes in centres around the fairly vitriolic arguments some of my friends there had around their theological stances. One friend, who is now a Presbyterian minister, was very much committed to the Calvinist viewpoint. Another was Methodist, and he favoured Arminianism.

There have been huge treaties written about these theological viewpoints, but very briefly Calvin taught that:

- God knows everything, therefore he knows who will be saved – the elect.
- God is infallible, therefore nobody else can be saved.
- Christ's atonement is limited to the elect
- People have no choice to turn to Christ, or away from Him
- Christ did not die for everyone.

Jacobus Arminius, the theologian who holds the alternate view, taught that:

- Christ's sacrifice is complete, and offered to everyone
- Free will is necessary and a person may choose to accept or reject God's offer of salvation.
- People can only be prompted to turn to God by the influence of the Holy Spirit
- While everyone can be saved, not everyone will

The difficulty with these theological positions is that there is support in Scripture for both of them. My trauma relates to the way my two friends, both committed Christians, had discussions around their theological interpretations that often created a lot more heat than light. Sadly, many churches have been split over theological differences like these, causing deep divisions which have never really healed. The Church has been damaged.

Today, I am going to tell you what I believe on the subject of predestination, Calvinism vs Arminianism. A statement like that, back when I was with my theologically convicted friends, would have started all-out war! Firstly though, I want to talk about Dr Who and Star Trek. I am sure lots of you here have been deeply scarred by the Daleks, or the cybermen. Dr Who continues to be popular, and the programming today does not even remotely compare with the terror we felt as children – the episode where the Daleks learned how to climb stairs still haunts me! Dr Who is a Time Lord, from the planet Gallifrey. He uses a TARDIS to manipulate time and relative dimensions in space, to travel the universe, setting wrongs right. A lot of the plots involve time travel, and Dr Who meets people travelling backwards in time, who get younger as he gets older, and the plots can be complex, quirky, and need a whole lot of concentration to understand. I like Dr Who, but I really enjoy other sci fi. I am also a trekkie, and if you feel brave enough, I can tell you the connection between the Jewish faith and the Vulcan salute, but you lot probably aren't that geeky! The crew of the Enterprise frequently skirt event horizons, travel faster than light and create temporal paradoxes. Why am I telling you this? In each of these shows clever people, far cleverer than I am,

have put together storylines which can completely fry the brains of normal people like me. It's their stock in trade, and can be enjoyed on different levels, depending on the knowledge and interests of the person watching. The stories often don't make sense to the people involved. The screenwriters have to give us the ability step outside our own reality, to accept that time travel and temporal paradoxes can occur, and to accept that the universe is bigger than we can appreciate.

Back to the complicated theology. What do I believe about Predestination? I believe in it. The Bible teaches that God knows who will be saved. What do I believe about Arminianism? I believe in it. The Bible teaches that Christ's sacrifice is for everyone, anyone can be saved.

How do I reconcile the two? Here is my secret. I don't. Just as the plot lines of the Sci Fi shows I enjoy can sometimes be beyond me, because the screen writers are cleverer than I am, so too is Scripture. The Bible, and the book of Romans in particular, is deep, complex, and often very difficult to understand.

I don't understand it all. The good thing is that I don't need to. I don't understand all the plot twists in some shows, but I can be a fan. I don't need to reconcile all theological problems, I just need to be aware of the God, who is immeasurably bigger and cleverer than I am, who has all of the plot twists brought together perfectly from His perspective of eternity. I have faith that He can resolve the conflicts we throw up in how we interpret the Bible, because He has the full picture.

That doesn't mean that theology isn't important – we declare our faith in the Apostle's creed each week, and should defend core truths vigorously, but secondary issues are not worth fighting over. We can accept that we won't understand everything until we stand in God's presence, and see it from His perspective.

What can we take away from Romans 11? We aren't alone. Verse 2-4. Elijah complained he was the only true believer, yet God was able to show him 7000 more. Other people are can still be Christians, even if they believe something a wee bit different to what we do. We have a whole lot more brothers and sisters in the faith than we imagine, and a much larger support network.

Verse 5-6 – we are saved by grace, not works. Nothing we do brings us to God, it is entirely of His action.

Verse 11-21: Anyone can come to Christ, they just need to ask for him to accept them. Paul talks about the people of God using the analogy of an olive tree. The olive tree initially was the Israelite people, some of whom chose to move away. They wanted to have their own mechanism for salvation, independent of what God taught them. Those branches were removed from the tree, and God grafted in new branches, the gentiles, that is, us. Through Christ, anyone can be grafted in, can become part of the people of God. That is through Grace, through God's offer. It isn't through baptism, confirmation, or taking communion. It is not from using a particular version of the bible, or wearing a suit. It is a gift, offered to all, and there for the taking. Anyone can come to Christ, they just need to ask for him to accept them. He is in control. He knows what is happening, even when we don't. He is waiting for us to come to him, and to become part of his chosen people. If you aren't there, I am always happy to talk to you at the end of the service.

The last few verses of Romans 11 are a great way to conclude this part of the service:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!  
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?”  
“Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay them?”  
For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen.