Romans 11:32, 'he may have mercy on all'

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> For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have **mercy on all.** (Romans 11:32, ESV)

This is a verse I've seen used by Universalists and obviously they take the all's to mean the whole human race without exception. But is this really what the verse teaches after the section of Romans known as God's Sovereign Choice (Rom 9-11)?

It can be reasonably seen that **all** here refers to Jews and Gentiles, but not every single one of them that has lived or will live. The earlier chapters (9-11) very well emphasize God's sovereignty in salvation. God has mercy on whom He wills (Rom 9:15), mercy only comes from God and it's entirely depended on God (Rom 9:16). It seems then very inconsistent for us to take the **all** without exception rather than **all without distinction.**

Commentaries

A brief comment is made by the **ESV Study Bible**: [1]

> Rom. 11:32 The word all here refers to Jews and Gentiles (all without distinction, not all without exception). The sin and disobedience of both Jews and Gentiles is highlighted, to emphasize God's mercy in saving some among both Jews and Gentiles.

John Gill writes:

> **For God hath concluded them all in unbelief,**.... Both Jews and Gentiles, particularly God's elect among them: some think the metaphor is taken from the binding up of sheaves in bands; and that Jews and Gentiles are the sheaves, and unbelief the band, in which they are bound together; but the apostle is not speaking of their being together in unbelief, but as separate, first the Gentiles, and now the Jews: rather it seems to be taken from a prison, and Jews and Gentiles are represented as prisoners, and unbelief the prison, in which they are shut up by God: not that God is the author of unbelief, or of any other sin in men; he does not put it into them, or them into that, but finding them in unbelief, concludes them in it, or leaves them in such a state, and does not as yet however deliver out of it, or say to the prisoners, go forth: moreover, to be "concluded in unbelief", is the same as to be "concluded under sin", Ga 3:22; that is, to be thoroughly convinced of it; and to be held and bound down by such a sense of it in the conscience, as to see no way to escape deserved punishment, or to obtain salvation, but by fleeing to the mercy of God in Christ:
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> **that he might have mercy upon all:** not upon all the individuals of Jews and Gentiles; for all are not concluded in, or convinced of the sin of unbelief, but only such who are eventually believers, as appears from the parallel text, Ga 3:22; and designs all God's elect among the Jews, called "their fulness", Ro 11:12; and all God's elect among the Gentiles, called "the fulness of the Gentiles", Ro 11:25; for whom he has mercy in store, and will bestow it on them; and in order

to bring them to a sense of their need of it, and that he may the more illustriously display the riches of it, he leaves them for a while in a state of unbelief, and then by his Spirit thoroughly convinces them of it, and gives them faith to look to, and believe in, the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, unto eternal life. John Gill, Exposition of the Entire Bible

Adam Clarke in his commentary said the following:

Verse 32. *For God hath concluded them all in unbelief*] συνεκλεισεγαροθεος, God hath shut or locked them all up under unbelief. This refers to the guilty state of both Jews and Gentiles. They had all broken God's law-the Jews, the written law; the Gentiles, the law written in their hearts; see Rom 1:19; Rom 1:20; Rom 2:14; Rom 2:15. They are represented here as having been accused if their transgressions; tried at God's bar; found guilty on being tried; condemned to the death they had merited; remanded to prison, till the sovereign will, relative to their execution, should be announced; shut or locked up, under the jailer, unbelief; and there both continued in the same state, awaiting the execution of their sentence: but God, in his own compassion, moved by no merit in either party, caused a general pardon by the Gospel to be proclaimed to all. The Jews have refused to receive this pardon on the terms which God has proposed it, and therefore continue locked up under unbelief. The Gentiles have welcomed the offers of grace, and are delivered out of their prison. But, as the offers of mercy continue to be made to all indiscriminately, the time will come when the Jews, seeing the vast accession of the Gentile world to the kingdom of the Messiah, and the glorious privileges which they in consequence enjoy, shall also lay hold on the hope set before them, and thus become with the Gentiles one flock under one shepherd and bishop of all their souls. The same figure is used Rom 3:22; Rom 3:23. But the Scripture hath concluded συνεκλεισεν, locked up all under sin, that the promise, by faith of Christ Jesus, might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept, εφρουρουμεθα, we were guarded as in a strong hold, under the law; shut up, συγκεκλεισμενοι, locked up together unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. It is a fine and well chosen metaphor in both places, and forcibly expresses the guilty, helpless, wretched state of both Jews and Gentiles. Adam Clarke, Commentary and Critical Notes

The following is said in the **Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible**:

For God hath concluded them all in unbelief , [***sunekleisen*** (G4788) ***tous*** (G3588) ***pantas*** (G3956) ***eis*** (G1519) ***apeitheian*** (G543)] - 'hath shut up all into unbelief' or 'disobedience:' our version, by rendering it "them all," leaves the impression (as Scholefield observes) that it is of Jews only that this is said; whereas the argument requires it to be understood of both the great divisions of mankind that are treated of in this chapter-hath shut up all (both Jew and Gentile) into unbelief.

That he might have mercy upon all - the same "all" of whom he had been discoursing; that is, the Gentiles first, and after them the Jews (so Fritzsche, Tholuck, Olshausen, DeWette, Philippi, Stuart, Hodge). Certainly it is not 'all men without limitation' (as Meyer and Alford); for the apostle is not here dealing with individuals, but with those great divisions of mankind, Jew and Gentile. And what he here says is, that God's purpose was to shut up each of these divisions of men to the experience, first, of an unhumbled, condemned state, without Christ, and then to the experience of His mercy in Christ. Jamieson, Fausset, Brown, Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible

This is said in **The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges**:

32. For God, &c.] Lit. **For God did shut up the all together into disobedience, that He may compassionate the all.** We give this literal version, though barbarous as English, to elucidate the exact reference of the Greek. "*The all*" are "all the persons in question"; Gentiles and Jews alike, who by turns have occupied the position of aliens from the enjoyment of salvation. The Divine Sovereign has permitted each great class in turn thus to develope its own sin of rebellious unbelief, ("shutting them up into it," as into a cage, or trap, into which they have leapt,) in order to the complete display of mercy, and only mercy, wholly apart from privilege or merit, in the salvation both of Gentiles and of Jews. Here again *mercy* is the emphatic idea.—"*Did shut up*:"—i.e. when He "cut off" the Jews: for this completed, as it were, the process of that developement of unbelief which was to bring out into clear light the equal sovereignty of mercy in all cases.

"*All*" must manifestly be taken here, as so often elsewhere, (see on ch. Rom 5:18,) with limitation. St Paul is contemplating not the whole race, but the whole *Church* in its two great elements—Gentile and Jewish. See Rom 2:8-9, for his distinct warning of a "judgment without mercy" on the impenitent and unbelieving, Gentiles and Jews alike.

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges

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[1] ESV Study Bible, 2008 (Crossway). Taken from the Online Version at www.esvbible.org