

Paul on Mount Everest

The Future of Israel – Part VI

Romans 11:33-36

Introduction

As we conclude the first eleven chapters of Romans today, and our 123rd sermon, for those of you who are counting, we are about to leave the subject of doctrine and move into the realm of duty. Paul is about to move us from belief to behavior; from principle to practice.

It is never enough to believe the truth, we must live the truth. We must not be hearers of the word only, but doers. We must move from education into application.

The first eleven chapters, and our 123 sermons through them, have educated us in many great doctrines of the faith. I did a quick review and found that we have covered the doctrines of original sin, grace, depravity, judgment, sin nature, salvation freely offered, faith, repentance, eternal hell and eternal heaven, justification, wrath, forgiveness, predestination, election, propitiation of Christ, and evangelism. In:

- chapter 1, we uncovered the gospel of God and the digression of sin;
- chapter 2, we studied the impartiality of God toward the moral man, who is held guilty along with immoral man;
- chapter 3, we heard God declare the condemnation of the world and the only hope through Jesus Christ;
- chapters 4 and 5, we studied God's plan of justification by faith alone;

- chapters 6 and 7, we studied God's design for sanctification in the life of His children;
- chapter 8, we uncovered our position of victory in Christ and heard the great judge say, "No condemnation," as if to say that it does not matter if you feel forgiven, you are forgiven; you are secure in the preserving power of God;
- chapter 9, we observed God's sovereignty in His election of Israel;
- chapter 10, Israel and the world of mankind was shown to be responsible moral agents;
- chapter 11, we uncovered the prophetic plan of God for Israel's future and the future of the world.

After all of that, is it any wonder that Paul, near the close of chapter 11, begins to magnify the mercy of God (verse 30), the mercy of God (verse 31), the mercy of God (verse 32)? Having taken us on an aerial view covering the ground from Adam's fall and the sewer of our sin to the grace of God through the sacrifice of Christ, what more could Paul say than, "Thank God for the mercy of our Lord. Praise You, Lord, for Your mercy. Thank You that Your faithfulness is great and Your mercy is new every morning."?

Ladies and gentlemen, true doctrine leads the student into an awareness of his sin and the greatness of his Savior. Doctrine leads us to our knees! But then, to our feet again, in order to serve this gracious and merciful God.

So chapter 12 opens with the words,

Therefore I urge you, . . . by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice . . .

Adoration leads to action. And in chapter 12, Paul will take us from learning about God into living for God. He will take us out of the classroom and into the laboratory of life, where truth is tested by fire and character is forged from tribulation.

Paul, however, does not go directly from the Christian's belief into the Christian's behavior. He seems to be a little overwhelmed as he reaches the peak of his doctrinal dissertation. It is as if he has scaled Mount Everest – climbing over and through one doctrinal challenge after another – but now, he has made it to the highest peak and it seems like he just wants to take it all in. He has hiked to the crest of divine truth and now, from this height, can see the grand sweep of God's revelation, ending with His mercy.

Paul cannot move on just now – he has seen the guilt of man and the grace of God; he has witnessed the corruption of society from God's perspective and then the compassion of the Savior – he cannot move on just yet! He seems overwhelmed with the grace and power and justice and sovereignty and love and mercy of God.

There is some shouting to do. Paul will end this major section of inspired scripture with a burst of joy and a sense of awe. You can hear him shouting from the top of Mount Everest all the way to the valley of our own lives, even to this day.

Paul Praises God!

In verses 33 through 36 of Romans, chapter 11, Paul cries,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Between the doctrine of Romans chapters 1 through 11 and the duty of Romans chapters 12 through 16 is this passage of joyful exaltation. Between doctrine and duty is a doxology. "Doxa" means "praise or glory"; "logia" means "words or rendering".

When correct doctrine is taught, the result is not a headache, the result is praise! Praise God from whom all blessings flow! We offer to God our words of glory and praise, for we have discovered something of His deity.

I remember coming home from the office one day when my twin boys were about four or five. When I pulled up, they were in the front yard and both were holding a hammer. Maybe Marsha had been singing around the house, "If I had a hammer," and that had inspired them. They came running over to me with grins on their faces and said, "Daddy, we know what God made rocks out of!"

I looked over to our side yard where several boulders had been placed for decoration, and one of them had really been worked over. I asked, "What did God make rocks out of?"

They said, "Dust! He stuck all the dust together and made rocks. Isn't that great, Daddy?!"

They were so excited about discovering something about what God had done! The discovery of something regarding God leads you to say the same thing, "Isn't that great?!"

Paul states "God is great" in several different ways

Before Paul moves us into the application of what we have learned about God, he stops, and for a few brief sentences, says, in several different ways, "Isn't God great?!" Let me rephrase Paul's first discovery in several ways.

When it comes to the mind of God, it is immeasurable

1. First, when it comes to the mind of God, it is immeasurable.

Paul writes in verse 33a,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! . . .

You could render this list of nouns in this way, "Oh, the rich depth of the wisdom and knowledge of God."

Divine knowledge is God knowing everything there is to know, perfectly.

Divine wisdom is God knowing how to apply everything He knows, perfectly.

Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God? Have you learned yet, that God never learned anything? He has always known.

A. W. Tozer writes,

God cannot learn; He never at any time or in any manner received into His mind knowledge that He did not possess and had not possessed from eternity. Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, He is never surprised, nor is He ever amazed.ⁱ

How deep is the mind of God!

Paul is delivering this praise in the face of God's revealed plan for the nation Israel and for all Gentiles as well.

God knows His plans; He knows every option and every alternative. And His plans include you, for the prophet Jeremiah has informed us, in chapter 29, verse 11, that He says,

. . . I know the plans I have for you . . . to give you a future and a hope.

One author explained it this way:

When you cannot explain why,

He knows the answer.

When you cannot give reasons,

He understands what they are.

When you cannot see the end,

He is already there.

Paul cries from Mount Everest down to where we are muddling through in the shadows, "Take courage! While you cannot measure the depth of God's knowledge and wisdom, rest assured His plans cannot be hindered; they cannot be altered; they will not be abandoned."

When it comes to the mind of God, it is immeasurable.

When it comes to the decisions of God, they are unsearchable

2. Secondly, when it comes to the decisions of God, they are unsearchable.

Paul goes on to shout another sentence – notice another exclamation point following the last phrase of verse 33 of Romans, chapter 11.

. . . How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

The word for judgment, used by Paul, is the word "krimata," which generally stands for "judicial verdicts". In the Bible, this words can be understood to refer to the decrees of God – and Paul says they are unsearchable.

This is simply another way of saying there is no way we can fully figure out the decision making process of God. We are bound by earth; He is boundless in eternity.

For us to search out the mystery of God's decrees is like a three year old trying to grasp the significance of the Constitution of the United States. We are spiritual kindergarteners, trying to spell out the mystery of God with alphabet blocks – and we seem to be missing some of the letters.

Take heart in your spelling, Paul is missing some letters too. He cannot fully explain the mystery of God's decrees, he can only simply express it.

When it comes to the mind of God – it is immeasurable.

When it comes to the decisions of God – they are unsearchable.

When it comes to the ways of God, they are untraceable

3. Thirdly, when it comes to the ways of God, they are untraceable.

Look at the latter part of verse 33 again.

. . . How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

Unfathomable – you will never get to the bottom of them, you just accept them!

The word unfathomable comes from an original word that literally refers to footprints that cannot be tracked. This creates an image in our minds of the tracks of an animal that a hunter is unable to detect. David referred to the inability of mankind to fully track the footprints of God when he wrote, in Psalm, chapter 77, verse 19,

Your way was in the sea and Your paths in the mighty waters, and Your footprints may not be known.

Now, the word of God has not been given to us to frustrate us in our inability to comprehend God. Paul is not saying there are things about God we cannot know, for there is much about God that we do know. Paul is on top of the mountain, surveying the content of eleven chapters of incredible revelation from God and about God, and he simply shouts, "We haven't

seen anything yet! There is so much about God we have yet to learn!”

No wonder James Denney, the revered Scottish theologian of one hundred fifty years ago, used to warn his seminary students against thinking they could learn all there was to know about God. He would often say to them, “Gentlemen, to study infinity will require eternity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

If you think we are going to sit around on clouds and strum on golden harps, think again. We will have eternity to discover the nature and character – the wisdom and grace and mercy and power – of Christ who is the fullness of deity! He will be the object and the delight of our eternal exploration.

We will have eternity to study infinity.

Paul asks two questions about God

Now Paul asks two questions, in verses 34 and 35 of Romans, chapter 11, quoting from two Old Testament books.

Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?

1. Look at verse 34 for the first question.

For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?

It is as if Paul adds evidence to his testimony that God is immeasurable, unsearchable and untraceable, by now asking, in effect, “Can anyone step forward and say they know the mind of God? Is there anyone here that He has ever asked for advice?”

Who has known the mind of the Lord, . . . who became His counselor? This is taken from Isaiah, chapter 40.

To put this verse in our modern vernacular, “Who in the world can instruct God in what to do? When has God ever asked you for help?”

The trouble is, we think God needs our help! So we do attempt to counsel God, more regularly than we would like to admit.

“Lord, I wouldn’t do that if I were you!”

“Lord, you seem to have forgotten some of the details!”

“Lord, your timing is off. What are you waiting for?!”

We seem to forget, God does not depend on our advice; He does not take His cues from us. We are not the stage manager and He the actor; we do not

prod Him on stage when we think it is time to for Him to perform.

Paul says, “Listen, from the view I have up here, forget about giving God any advice – He is the strong sovereign and we are His weak, needy servants.”

The problem is, we get a little caught up in ourselves! We might even strut around with an air of “know it all” that betrays our pride.

Clifton Fadiman, in his *Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, told the story of the current reigning world heavy-weight champion boxer, Muhammad Ali. Ali was at the height of his fame and he was on an airplane that was preparing to take off. The flight attendant came by and reminded him to fasten his seat belt. Ali said, “Superman don’t need a seat belt.” To which the quick thinking flight attendant replied, “Superman don’t need an airplane, either.” Ali buckled his seat belt.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are not God – sometimes we have to remember to simply buckle up!

Who has first given to the Lord that it might be paid back to Him again?

2. The apostle Paul pulls a second quote out of the book of Job. Look at verse 35.

Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again?

In other words, “When did God depend on mankind and borrow strength and resources that He had to repay? When was God indebted to man?”

We talk of God theologically as self-sufficient – He is entirely complete. There was a time when there was nothing but God – He was complete then. There was no sun, yet He dwelt in light. There was no heaven, yet His glory was unbounded. When He introduced Himself to Moses, He said, “I am who I am.” How is that for a self-sufficiency?

Paul says, “From my view, it’s clear – God is not indebted to man, man is indebted to God.”

Missionary Gracie Burnham, was held captive by terrorists in the Philippines for more than a year. Her husband was killed during their rescue. Gracie was interviewed a little over a year ago, and she said, “I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life’s supposed to be because of that. But out in the jungle, I learned I don’t know as much about God as I thought I did. What I do know for certain now is this – God is God and I am not. The world’s in a mess because of sinful man, not God – and awful

things may happen to me, but God does what is right.^{iv}

She learned that in the jungle – God is God and I am not and while I may sin, God will never do anything but right.

From the field of India comes another incredible story of trust and surrender. This time from the life of William Carey who began his missionary career in 1793. He would labor in that country for forty years without ever returning to England.

One afternoon, after twenty years of plodding, hard labor in the translation of the Bible into several languages, along with other critically important translation projects including a Dictionary, a fire broke out and ripped through his printing plant and warehouse. All of his printing equipment was destroyed along with his manuscripts. This was before the days of computer back-up files and photocopiers. Twenty years of nonstop labor, gone within a few hours. Later, William Carey wrote these words to his pastor-friend, Andrew Murray, in England,

To me, the consideration of God's sovereignty and wisdom have been supporting . . . I endeavored to improve our affliction last Lord's day, by reading from Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." I meditated on two ideas:

1. *God has a sovereign right to do as He pleases.*
2. *I am to acquiesce in whatever God does with me and to me.*^v

Wow! That is another way of saying, "God owes us nothing; we owe Him everything."

The incredible news is that one day, God will give us everything.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the view from the top of Mount Everest. Or better yet, from the top of Mount Zion and the coming city of our God.

Paul praises God for three more things

Paul ends his doxology with these great and familiar words in verse 36a,

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. . . .

Paul praises God for three more things in this verse. Let us look at them.

God is the original source

1. ***For from Him [ἐξ (ex)] . . . are all things. . .*** . This is literally, "For out of Him are all things". Paul says first, with great joy, "God is the original source."

God is the only channel

2. ***and through Him [διὰ (dia)] . . . are all things . . .*** Paul says, secondly, "God is the only channel."

God is the ultimate goal and glory of all things

3. ***and to Him [εἰς (eis)] are all things . . .*** This could be worded, "and back to Him". So, thirdly, Paul declares, "God is the ultimate goal and glory of all things."

We have to make a radical shift in our earthbound perspective. We think first of our needs and, even when we are thinking in terms of God, we think first in terms of our salvation and our happiness, rather than of God's glory.

Why did God create the heavens and the earth?

We answer, "To give us a beautiful place to live and work."

That is true to a certain degree, but the Bible says, in Psalm, chapter 19, verse 1a,

The heavens are telling of the glory of God .

. . .

Why did Jesus Christ come into the world, live a sinless life, and die on the cross?

We would answer, "To save us from our sins."

We would be right, but there is a higher purpose. As Jesus prayed in the garden to God the Father, as recorded in John, chapter 17, verse 4,

I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.

The triune God has received glory from the obedience of Christ.

What will the saints be saying when they stand before the throne of God?

We suppose we will be singing praises for how good God has been to us, and that will be part of it, no doubt. But the lyrics have already been provided in the inspired score,

. . . To Him who sits on the throne, and unto the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory

and dominion forever and ever. (Revelation 5:13)^{vi}

That is the view from heaven. Paul has caught a glimpse of it too, and he begins singing it, this side of heaven!

Paul concludes his doxology, “To God be the glory forever. Amen.”

Can Paul end his doxology any other way than saying, in verse 36b,

... To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

To Him be the glory forever.

To Him be the glory forever.

To Him be the glory forever.

To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

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ⁱ James Boice, Romans: Volume 3 (Baker Books, 1993), p. 1419.

ⁱⁱ Robert Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), p. 351.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Swindoll, Shedding Light on our Dark Side (Insight for Living, 1993), p. 85.

^{iv} Corrie Cutrer, “Soul Survivor,” Today's Christian Woman (Jul./Aug., 2003), p. 50.

^v Bill Mills and Craig Parro, Finishing Well (Leadership Resources), p. 101.

^{vi} Boice, p. 1435.