

Romans: Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder

Romans 11:33-36

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 11. We've been studying through this gospel of the apostle Paul to the Romans for a number of months now. We have worked our way through almost the whole of the first eleven chapters, the section of the book that is normally called the theological portion of the book. Chapters 12 through 16 now turn their attention to practical matters of the Christian life in which Paul gives some specific instructions on how Christians ought to live in light of the truth that he has revealed. But Paul would not have accepted the idea that the theology of the first eleven chapters was impractical. In fact, he would have argued that in order to be practical one must embrace the truth of the first eleven chapters, and in order to actually embrace the truth of the first eleven chapters, one would have to put that truth into practice. So there is an inseparable nexus between truth and practice, biblical teaching and biblical Christian living in the mind of the Apostle Paul. For Paul, there is no practicality divorced from an embrace from the truth and so, in most of his letters, he begins by teaching truth and in setting out how that might impact the specifics of daily Christian life. He does that here in Romans. Generally the book of Romans is divided in chapters 1 through 11 and 12 through 16 in the theological and practical portions.

I do want to suggest to you today that it may well be that the so-called practical portion of Romans begins in verse 33 of chapter 11. It is with praise that the Christian begins his response to the truth of God. And though Paul speaks in Romans 12 of things of which we will immediately see as practical for Christian living, Romans 11 verses 33 through 36 is no less practical in the sense that it is the first and proper response of the believer to the glorious truth that has been revealed.

Do you remember, all the way back in Romans chapter 1 Paul had begun to reveal to us our sin, our need. He had revealed to us in Romans chapter 1 verses 18 to the end of the chapter, the wrath of God that we deserved. In Romans chapter 2, he had made it clear that Jew and Gentile both stood under the condemnation of God. In Romans chapter 3 he had begun to teach us this glorious truth, that though there is no hope for us because of our sin, yet there is

hope for us through the grace and mercy of God, and so begins to show us this teaching, this doctrine of justification by God's grace received through faith alone. He confirms it from the Bible, from the Old Testament in Romans chapter 4. In Romans chapter 5 he begins to work out some of its practical applications and ramifications for us. In Romans chapter 6 he teaches us about what it means to be united to Jesus Christ, but he also makes it clear that we continue to have a struggle against sin. He expands on that in Romans chapter 7 and he talks about the ongoing struggle of sin, even of the believer with sin, even as he tells us about the proper role of the law in the Christian life. In Romans chapter 8 he tells us about the power of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life. In the second part of that chapter he teaches us about God's gospel providence over believers. How He causes all things to work together for good for those whom the Lord has called according to His purpose and he reveals to us the teaching of election and he begins to expand on the teaching of predestination. Then in Romans 9 through 11, he begins to tell about God's plan of salvation and how it encompasses both Jew and Gentile. In response to all these things here in Romans 11 verses 33 through 36 he lifts up a doxology. He says, in light of what we've learned, we praise God. Let us hear God's word together in Romans chapter 11 beginning in verse 33.

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

Our Heavenly Father, open our eyes to behold wonderful things from Your word and give us a heart and a voice to sing Your praise. In Jesus name. Amen.

Occasionally preachers come across passages in the Scripture that we feel supremely incapable of doing justice to. You tremble a little bit when you come to passages like that. Sometimes they are beloved passages which the people of God have treasured up in their hearts for years. They are familiar and it's hard to do justice to a passage where you have years and years of treasured memory and a specialness associated in your minds. This is one of those passages. This great doxology is compact. The prose is beautiful; the content is shot through with significance. You couldn't say this again and say all the things Paul says without writing a long paragraph and you tremble a little bit when you get ready to teach a passage like this. You wonder how in the world you can do justice. Well I can't do justice to this passage, but the same apostle who wrote these words said that all Scripture is given by inspiration and it is profitable for your instruction in training and righteousness. With the confidence that that is true about this word of Scripture, we tremblingly approach this great doxology of the Apostle Paul, realizing that as Paul lifted up this doxology to God, perhaps spontaneously as he reflected on the glorious truth which he had been writing down under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul meant not only to praise God, but to give us an example of how to praise God, to explain to us why we ought to praise God and to instruct us in why we ought to praise God.

I'd like you to see two or three things that Paul reveals to us, two or three things Paul instructs us in, in this great passage. Paul, in the midst of this great passage teaches us at least three things. First, in verse 33, he reminds us that we ought to praise God for what we do know and for what we don't know. In verse 34, secondly, he teaches us that God's exalted knowledge and His infinite wisdom enable us to trust Him and praise Him at all times. We not only praise God because of what we know and because of what we don't know, but we praise God for His exhaustive wisdom and knowledge. Thirdly, in verses 35 and 36, we see that God's sole ownership of this world demands that His glory be acknowledged. So as Paul lifts up this doxology, he teaches us these things.

I. The revelation of God's plan of redemption.

Let's look then to verse 33 where we see this exclamation of praise. Paul begins to sing of the depth of the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge. He speaks of the wisdom and the knowledge of God as they are displayed in God's judgments and God's ways. We see in this verse the revelation of God's plan of redemption that involves both Jew and Gentile. Paul, when he thinks about this story which he has been revealing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Romans chapter 9 through 11 especially, when he thinks of it, it moves him to praise God. His mind is boggled at the wisdom of God. Of course, as Paul's mind is boggled at the wisdom of God, he gives us an example of how we ought to respond to that same story. We ought to join him in praise. He says, "Oh the depth of the riches both and of the knowledge of God, how un-searchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways." Let's look at some of the words in this passage and appreciate how Paul is using them when he speaks of the depth of God's riches. He's reminding us that God's riches are incalculable, they are immeasurable. You can't come up with a number that matches the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge. It's beyond all telling.

My father served in the South Pacific with the Marines in the Second World War and after his division was being moved from Palau and the battlefield there on towards Japan in preparation for the invasion for the mainland of Japan, they stopped the fleet of ships over the great Marianas Trench. Now, I love globes. I don't know whether you're a globe meister like I am, but I love globes. I especially like globes that have topographical indications on them so you can see how high things are and how deep things are. I especially like globes that don't just have thirty thousand feet above sea level, but actually have the raised mountains and such so you can see the relative height of the land. Well, if you look on a globe on the western end of the Pacific Ocean, you will see a very deep blue patch known as the Great Marianas Trench. It is the deepest body of

water anywhere in the world. It is so deep that you could put Mount Everest into the Great Marianas Trench and the top of Mount Everest would be one thousand feet below the sea level. It is a tremendous place. And so they stopped this fleet of ships and they said, "Would you like to jump off the deck of the ship and swim in the Great Marianas Trench so you can go back and tell your family that you have swum in the deepest part of the ocean any where in the world?" My father said that he foolishly decided to join the men that were doing this. So he dove off the deck of the ship. I'm not sure how high that would have been above sea level, a lot higher than any high dive I've been off of. He said that when he hit that water he went down, and down, and down, and he wondered if he was ever coming back up again. He said it was a strange thing to finally come back up to the surface that he would have had to have gone down thirty thousand feet in order to touch bottom. It was beyond him. He said, "I couldn't even comprehend how deep this water was." Well, this is what Paul is saying; "You can't even begin to comprehend the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge." So when he speaks of the depth, he is speaking of the immeasurable nature of God's wisdom and knowledge. When he speaks, of course, of God's knowledge, he's referring to God's exhausted understanding of all things. When he speaks of God's wisdom, he's referring to God's intelligently directing all things. God is causing all things to work in accordance with His knowledge towards a specific end, so he speaks of the wisdom and the knowledge of God.

When he speaks in the second part of verse 33 of the judgments of God, he's using a judicial term. Judgments were normally judicial deliverances. A judge makes a judgment of a case and the apostle Paul is saying, when I look at the judgments that God has handed down, my mind is boggled at the wisdom, at the justice, and perhaps even sometimes at the mercy of God's judgments. Then when he speaks of the ways of God, he is speaking of the way in which God deals with men in His providence. So Paul in this verse is praising God because of the incalculable wisdom and knowledge that He displays in His judgments and in His dealings with men. In light of this plan of salvation, which has been revealed and which has been explained to a certain extent, the Apostle Paul marvels and praises God.

My friends, there are many practical things to be learned from that. For one, notice that in this verse Paul praises God both for what He knows and for what He doesn't know. What starts Paul off on this doxology? The thought of God's plan of redemption. God has revealed that plan of redemption. Paul knows a lot about that plan of redemption. Paul wants you to know a lot about that plan of redemption, and it moves him to praise, but it doesn't mean that Paul understands everything. I mean, what is the point of the verse? His judgment and His ways are unsearchable and unfathomable. So Paul is praising God both for what he knows, because God revealed it to him, and for what he doesn't know.

Don't get the idea that at the end of Romans 11 verse 32, Paul is saying; "Now I have sorted out every possible question that you could ever have about life.

There are no more questions left, I have answered them all." Don't get the idea that that is what Paul is saying. That's not what Paul is saying. Paul has explained many things. He's explained many things to us beyond our previous understanding. He's explained some things to us that we are still scratching our heads about. Paul has had many questions in His mind solved by God's answers in biblical teaching and revelation, but Paul hasn't answered every question that has ever existed, oh no. Paul is keenly aware, even as much as he has revealed to us by God's own word that there are many things which are unsearchable and unfathomable for us, but God is praised here by Paul for both the things that He has revealed and the things that He has not revealed. He's praised for both the things that we know and for the things that we don't know, and that is a tremendously important lesson for Christians.

You know, those who have embraced the doctrines of grace, call it whatever you want, the Reformed faith, or Calvinism, or whatever, have often moved from a period of time in which they had numerous question, especially about how God's sovereignty related to man's responsibility. And as they have embraced the Reformed faith, because they've studied the Scriptures and they believed the Scriptures to teach it, many of their previous questions have been answered. But don't get the idea that the Reformed faith purports to have explained everything, or to have answered every question. That's not the source of our confidence in the Reformed faith. The source of our confidence in the Reformed faith is not that we now have all the answers, although we now have some answers that we didn't have before now. The great confidence of the reformed faith is not that you have the answer, or that Calvin had the answer, or that Paul has all the answers, but that God has all the answers. He has revealed to us that which we need to know and He knows that which He has not revealed to us and both those things ought to cause us to praise Him. That's what the Apostle Paul is saying to us here. God's redeeming plan, which He has revealed to us, ought to move us to praise, but even those things that He hasn't revealed to us ought to move us to praise Him. We praise God because of what we do know and because of what we don't know. That's one great practical lesson we learn from this verse.

You know, another great and practical lesson we learn is this. Paul starts off in this verse praising God because of His plan of redemption. What's he doing there? He's reminding us of the greatness of our God, the bigness of our God and he's reminding us of the bigness of our God's plan. The bigness of our God and the bigness of His plan puts our little problems in perspective. You know, so often we go the Scripture looking for something that will practically speak to us today and sometimes what we need is something that will practically speak to us today about what ever our small problem is. Sometimes we need to go to the Scripture and get lost in the bigness of the plan of which we are a part by God's grace, and realize that we have been caught up in this stream of God's grace, in this grand design, which is going to be accomplished and will not fail. Sometimes we just need to be lost in wonder, love, and praise. We need to go to the Scripture, maybe hoping for a solution or an idea, or some guidance and get

there and just be awash with a sense of awe at the mystery of God's grace and greatness. Paul's words here remind us of that. We may have gone to Romans looking for a specific answer to a specific question that remains unanswered for us. And yet still be praising God because we've seen how big He is and we've seen how great His is and we've seen how great His grace is to us. And we learn that from Paul's praise to God here. We praise God for what we do know and for what we don't know. Aren't you glad that you don't know everything? Haven't there been things in your life, which having gone through them you've looked back and you've said, "Lord thank you for not revealing to me that You had called me to go through that. I couldn't have borne the knowledge." He bares that knowledge for us in His love and bids us praise Him both for what we know and for what we don't know.

II. The Bible's teaching about His wisdom and knowledge evoke our praise and trust in Him.

Then look at verse 34. Here Paul begins a set of scriptural quotations. Actually he has a set of quotations in verses 34 and 35 . He asks three questions out of two biblical quotations. The first quotation comes from Isaiah, the second comes from Job. He's quoting Scripture in order to confirm to you that he's not just dreaming this stuff up. How often have you seen Paul do this? Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells you a truth, but he knows that you may be a little bit suspicious, so he quotes Scripture to you because the book settles all. Paul is quoting in verses 34 and 35 from Scripture, from Isaiah and from Job, in order to confirm in your mind what he says is true, because it's one thing to say these things, but it's another thing to believe them.

In verse 34 he makes a quote in order to confirm what he says in verse 33. In verse 35 he makes a quote in order to confirm what he is going to say in verse 36. So, let's look at verse 34 alone for a moment even though the two quotes are back to back. These two questions in verse 34 and one scriptural quotation in verse 34 concern the wisdom and knowledge of God. Paul is confirming what he has just told us in verse 33 about the wisdom and knowledge of God. He's reminding us that the Bible teaching about God's wisdom and knowledge enables us to trust in Him, but more than that it enables us to praise Him at all times. He makes a beeline for Isaiah 40 verse 13. Did you notice, by the way, in the Scripture reading today that Mark starts with Isaiah? He gives you that glorious header, that this is the gospel of the Son of God and then he goes right to Isaiah. That beautiful link between Isaiah and the New Testament is where Paul's going. How many times has he done this? Here is Paul going back to Isaiah 40 verse 13, and he quotes a pretty accurate rendering of the Greek translation of this verse, "Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or as His counselor has informed Him."

Paul's point is two-fold. His first point is that we don't know all the things that God

knows. God's mind is filled with all knowledge. His knowledge is exhaustive and so there is not one of us who knows the mind of the Lord. His second point is this. Since none of us knows the mind of the Lord, who among us is in the position to give Him advice? It's like Paul is saying, "Over here in this line everybody who knows what's in the mind of the Lord." Line is empty. "Over here, everybody who's ready to give God some advice." Now the interesting thing is that that line is often fairly long and Paul wants nobody to be in that line, because there is nobody in this line. There is nobody that knows the things that the Lord knows. There is nobody that knows the mind of the Lord. Therefore there is nobody in the position to give Him advice, but we so often want to help. "Lord, we would have done it better if we had been in charge," but we don't know what the Lord knows.

The Greek pagans, philosophers that they were, even they understood this. They would say, "Whom the gods would destroy, they answer their prayers." What does that mean? It means, that we don't know what's best for us. Sometimes the things that we want would destroy us, but God knows everything and in His wisdom He causes all things to work toward His good end in light of His exhaustive knowledge of everything. So Paul is practically saying, "Look, if God is possessed of all knowledge and wisdom and we are not, shouldn't we close our mouths in complaint against Him? If we are not in the position to advise Him because we don't know His mind and we can't counsel Him, shouldn't we acknowledge our finitude and His unbounded wisdom and understanding?" You know, Paul asks us to do more than that here. Paul isn't just asking us to survive the outrageous slings of fortune. Paul is not just asking us to just sort of grit our teeth and endure God's sovereignty. He is asking us to praise God for His exhaustive knowledge and His wisdom and that entails an element of trust.

You see the Scriptures' teaching about God's wisdom and our lack of it ought to check our size of complaint and it ought to evoke our praise because one indispensable basis of being able to trust God is the realization that He knows everything. If He doesn't, my friends, we're undone.

You know, one of the sad things that's going on today is that there are people who call themselves evangelical Bible-believing Christians, who are working hard to impose the teaching on the Church today that God does not know everything. Now, they literally put it that way. "God does not know everything," for instance. They say, "He does not know the future." Why? Well, "We create the future with the decisions that we make and therefore God can't know the future because we're creating the future, it doesn't exist yet, we create the future by the decisions we make." They say, "Isn't this comforting, because just as we have uncertainties in life, God has to face uncertainties too."

My friends, that is the least comforting thing that I have ever heard. They go on to say that "Because that is true, in prayer we can actually change God's mind and we can actually create the future through our prayer to God." That, my friends, is

an even more unsettling thing for me to think about. I know my black heart. I don't want God to let my black heart determine the course of the future. You all are in trouble if I am determining the course of the future. You want God to be determining that, not me. So it is precisely the reality that God knows everything that enables us not only to trust Him, but to praise Him.

My friends, there are some times in life where that is very hard to do. I had a father sitting in my office not long ago and he looked at me and he said, "Ligon, I never thought I'd be planning my son's funeral." You know, if you don't believe in the exhaustive wisdom and knowledge of God, I don't know how you get through things like that. There are many, many, many people with different kinds of challenges just like that here today, but because your God is wise and exhaustively so, and because He knows exhaustively, we can not only trust Him but we can praise Him. That's what Paul is doing right here. We hasten on.

III. Our glorious God is the source, supplier, and owner of all things, and therefore worthy of praise.

In verses 35 and 36, Paul teaches us one more thing. Here in verse 35 we get another question and we get it in the context of a scriptural quotation from the book of Job, Job 41:11. It concerns God's ownership of everything. Then it's followed in verse 36 by a doxology. It's followed by a word of praise because of God's sole ownership of everything. His sole sovereignty, His universal ownership and because of the wisdom of His plan, and providence. What's Paul teaching us here in verses 35 and 36? He's teaching us that our glorious God is the source and the supplier and the owner of all things and therefore He's worthy of praise.

Look at what he says in verse 35. He quotes Job 41:11 which says, "Who has given to Me that I should repay Him? Whatever is under the whole Heaven is Mine." It reminds us of David's word in I Chronicles 29:14 when he says, "All things come from You. O Lord, and from Your hand we have given to You." In other words, David is saying there is nothing that we can give back to You, Lord, that You haven't given to us first. Therefore, Paul's point: none of us can put God under obligation. None of us can ever say, "Lord you have not given me what belongs to me," because nothing belongs to you. Everything belongs to Him. He is the sole proprietor of the universe. Listen to what Paul says, "From Him," He is the source of everything. "Through Him," He is the agent, the instrument, the supplier, and "to Him," everything belongs, everything goes, everything finds its goal in Him. From Him and through Him, and to Him are somethings, most things, the vast majority of things? No! All things, so no man can say, "Lord You haven't given me what is mine," because it's all His. No man can give to Him and say, "Lord I'm giving You this and You've never had it before," because it was all His in the first place. No one can say, "Lord you haven't given me what I deserved," because He's the sole owner and everything that He gives is literally

a gift. There is no obligation from Him. Because of that the Apostle Paul says, we need to praise God.

Our *Shorter Catechism* asks the question, "What is the chief end of man?" We answer rightly and biblically, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." What we don't often ask is, "Why is the chief end of man to glorify and enjoy Him forever?" The *Child's Catechism* answers that question. Children, you remember the children's catechism begins with, "Who made you?" "God." "What else did God make?" "God made everything." "Why did God make you and everything else?" "For His own glory." That's why the chief end of man is to glorify God, because God made you and He made you for His own glory.

That's exactly what Paul is saying here. We're made for His glory, the universe was made for His glory and we're obligated to give Him back the praise and glory which is due His name. Everything that is good in this life He has been gifted to us by His grace. Everything bad, well we deserved worse and therefore we praise Him. Now it's easy to know that that's what the Bible teaches. It's fairly easy to demonstrate that. It's harder to believe that, it's harder yet to live that way. By God's grace may He enable you to praise Him at all times in all circumstances because you know that He made this world for His glory and He knows all things. Let us pray.

Lord and God, grant that we may love and sing and wonder at You, Your knowledge, Your mercy, Your judgment, Your plan, Your sole ownership. In Jesus name. Amen.

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