

Romans 11:33-36

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[0 : 00] Would you turn us now to the last four verses of Romans 14, on page 1139, from verse 33 on to the end of the chapter.

O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out! But who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counsellor?

Who has ever given to God that God should repay Him, for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

And I want to start just by saying a word to the young people. I think probably when we were reading through Romans 14, some of you boys and girls were perhaps finding it quite difficult. I think if you were honest, well I think if you were all honest, all of us say that that was really quite a difficult passage to get to grips with to understand. And you remember, one of the things that we always need to remember about Paul's letters, was that everybody down through the ages has at times found them quite difficult.

[1 : 19] Even the Apostle Peter, in one of his epistles actually says that Paul has written things which are difficult to understand. So if the Apostle Peter is having difficulty understanding some of the really deep things that Paul's been saying, well I think there's some sort of excuse for you young people.

But can I just say a little bit about the passage for you young people, so as that you'll be able perhaps to pick up things here and there in the course of the sermon. Now what we have in these four verses, from verse 33 to verse 36, is what we call, here comes a big word, a doxology.

A doxology. It's spelt D-O-X-O-L-O-G-Y. It actually means, literally, words about glory, or words relating to God's glory.

That's what it means literally, but what we use the word about, when we've got a, shall we say, a short expression of praise.

Every now and again in the epistles and in other parts of the Bible too, in the letters of the different apostles, we find what we call doxologies. They've been writing about something which has been really great and marvellous and moving, and they put in a verse or two where they praise God for it.

[2 : 38] That's what the doxology is, and that's what we have here. It's an expression of thanksgiving to God for what he's done. Now one of the really interesting things about Romans is that this theological section, from chapter 1 to chapter 11, has often been used by God when he sends revival to his people.

All over the world, when ministers and preachers have been preaching, from different parts in Romans 1 through 11, revivals have broken out. Not always, of course, but quite often.

This particular first section of Paul's epistle to the Romans, his letter to the Romans, has been used by the Lord in bringing reformation. Remember, this is the section of the Bible that particularly Luther, Martin Luther, the first of the reformers, found very, very important.

It changed his understanding of the whole Bible. Changed his whole understanding of how people are saved, how he, Martin Luther, was saved. So it's a very, very important section, and I do say never forget that.

When you're young, you'll find it quite difficult to understand, but don't that be an excuse for not bothering to read Paul's letter to the Romans, because even if you're only understanding a verse here and there, God can bless that to you.

[4 : 01] And as I said earlier on, before we read the chapter, it's the end of the first section of the epistle to the Romans. Now from verse 18 of chapter 1 through to verse 20 in chapter 3, Paul explains the condemnation, the way in which God finds the whole human race guilty before him and

his sight because of their sins.

And then from chapter 3, verse 21 through to chapter 5 at verse 11, Paul presents the great hope of salvation through justification by faith.

One of the great doctrines of Christianity, that people are saved from their sins. God sees them, instead of seeing them as guilty, he sees them as righteous in his sight, as being good in his sight, if they trust the Lord Jesus and his death on the cross to save them from their sins.

That's, if you like, almost at the very heart of the whole Christian message. Justification by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's there in those two or three chapters of Romans between chapter 3 and chapter 5.

And then in chapters 6 to 8, Paul gives principles for how to live the Christian life. You want to know how to be a Christian? Well, in those three chapters, 6 to 8 of Romans, you'll find that Paul lays down the principles as to how we should all live.

[5 : 30] It's hugely important, you see. You want to know how to be a Christian? Read and reflect and understand on those Romans chapter 6 to Romans chapter 8.

And then in chapters 9 to 11, and this involves the chapter that we read, Paul gives a defense of God's righteousness in his dealings with both the Jews and the Gentiles in the course of history. And he's highlighting the fact, and especially he highlights it in chapter 11 that we read, how the outcome of God's dealings with the Jews and relating to his dealings with the Gentiles, how the outcome is going to be a great blessing for both races, the Jews and everybody else who isn't a Jew, like I imagine most of us are out here, unless there's any Jewish believers here worshipping tonight.

But the outcome, says Paul, is a great blessing in the future. And God's plan, says Paul, is so wonderful that it leads to this great outburst of praise, this great doxology in verses 33 to 36.

Quite often Paul bursts into these, if you like, hymns of praise. Ephesians chapter 3, verses 20 to 21. Here's a very similar one.

[6 : 52] Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

So what Paul is making is a general point. And he's saying that if you study God and his ways, then that will lead to our hearts giving voice to a never increasing joy.

That's really what Paul is saying. And here's the really interesting thing. Perhaps I suppose since we were talking about mysteries this morning, we might say that this is the really mysterious way, thing about this passage, is that what makes us give praise to God is not what we know about God, but what we don't know.

And you remember you young people, and I was talking to you this morning in the children's address, that's what we were talking about, wasn't it? You know, we can't know by ourselves everything about God, we can't even begin, we can't even begin to begin understanding who God is and how great he is.

That's why the Bible is so important. We said that, you remember that, when I was talking about the shellfish. Okay? So, that's what we have. And even, of course, what is revealed to us in the Scriptures about God, we don't fully comprehend either.

[8 : 23] So, Paul is finding, at bottom, the reason why we praise God is not just because of what we know, it's also because of what we can't grasp about him either, but what we catch glimpses of.

So, Paul breaks into praise, not because he's been able to give a final and complete solution to some of life's biggest problems and most difficult problems.

He certainly gives us, in the course of Romans here, and his other epistles as well, some of the answers, we have to acknowledge that, but to some very important questions which face us in life, the answer is still not revealed.

But it's Paul's conviction, his absolute conviction, that there is a solution and that the solution is in God's hands and that when he shows us a solution, we will be amazed at its wondrous nature. And because of that, he breaks out into this great expression of praise, this doxology, as we call it. So, let's look in more detail then at what Paul says here in verses 33 to 35.

[9 : 43] Well, the first thing he says is this, and I think we can put it like this, the believing heart expresses wonder. If you're a believer, in your hearts when you think about God, you will express wonder and you will praise him.

That's what Paul is saying. Paul's expression of wonder at God's doings in this world begins with two terms.

They're there in verse 33. Wisdom and knowledge. Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. Now, wisdom and knowledge are two very important terms for every Christian. In biblical terms, can I put it like this? Knowledge is the gathering of information. When you read the Bible, you gather information.

You gather information about God, about the Lord Jesus, and also about how the Lord wants us to live. You young people, that's something for you to remember.

[10:58] When you read the Bible, you find out more about God and you find out more about how God wants you to live. But the second question is this, what are you going to do with that knowledge?

And wisdom, I think, in biblical terms, is knowing what to do with it. There's no point in knowing the story of Samson like we were looking at this morning unless you actually use it for something.

Use it for your spiritual benefit. That's why the historical books of the Bible are there. That's why all the books of the Bible are there. We are to use them.

Lord Jesus says, blessed are those not just who hear my words, but who do them. And wisdom is knowing what to do with the Word of God.

One of the 19th century commentators said, wisdom directs all things to the best end. Knowledge knows that end and the issue or the outcome of it.

[12:10] So Paul, if you like, is looking at the history of Israel, the way in which the Jews rejected the Lord Jesus as Saviour, which led to the gathering in of people who weren't Jews.

And then he focuses on what are the problems that arise from that and how should Gentiles see the Jews in relation to that and how should the Jews see the Gentiles and what God is going to do at the end of the day with what he's done.

So Paul, if you like, marvels at God's wisdom, especially with regard to his dealings with Israel. And he said, he says, God hasn't failed the Jews despite their rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Paul says that one day the blessing is going to return to the children of Israel, to the Jews, having gone to the Gentiles in the meantime. And it means that Christians, therefore, are never to be uninterested in the question of the salvation of the Jews, the way in which the Scriptures indicate that the time is coming when really significant numbers of the Jewish people are going at last to recognise the Lord Jesus as their Saviour.

And he says, just imagine that. If the Gentiles rejecting Christ has led to this marvellous blessing for those who are not, if the rejection of the Lord Jesus by the Jews has led to the people who are not Jews, the Gentiles getting the blessing, just think what it's going to be like when the Jews as a nation turn to the Lord Jesus.

[13:54] It'll be a sign that the world will be absolutely unable not to see the significance of it. Don't ever, ever, ever, never think but it's alright to forget about the Jews.

One of the really fascinating things about the history of the free church is that at the same time as the free church came into existence in 1843, they were actively working on the question, the problem of how to bring the gospel to the Jewish people.

That's where Christian Witness to Israel, the organisation, began. So, never, ever forget to bear in mind that the Lord does have a purpose for his people. And when Paul thinks about that, well, it's really as if one exclamation is not enough for Paul.

Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. And then he says, how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. How beyond us God is, says Paul. How unsearchable, how unfathomable. The word actually is, well, actually the way we've got it here in the NIV is accurate, beyond tracing out. Literally, he says, Paul says, God's judgments and his paths are untraceable by us.

[15:10] To try to trace God's dealings with men and women and explain them is as futile as tracking his footprints in the sea as the psalmist had it in Psalm 77 that we've just sung.

Isaiah, famous chapter 55, my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, says God. So God is by nature incomprehensible to us in his actions.

We can't really understand everything that the Lord is doing. One reason for this, of course, is that our experience limits us. We can't think in categories which are beyond our range of experience or sensation.

You young people, you remember about the shellfish. Well, the shellfish looking at man couldn't understand what men are and how they live at all. Well, it's a bit like that with God when we think about God and how he works out his purposes and his plans.

Very, very difficult for us to grasp. That's the way it is. That's why it's so often the case that the Lord's people find themselves in situations where they really can't understand what's happening to them. It's because the Lord's ways are not our ways.

[16:21] He's not letting you go because you run into difficulties. It's not that he doesn't care, of course not. What he's actually doing is working out his purposes and for you, for his people, it's a purpose of blessing.

Never lose sight of that. We're so prone, aren't we, to lose track, if you like, of what God is doing in our lives and indeed it's the case that we never actually had a full understanding at all of his purposes for us and what he was doing in our lives.

That's the way it is for his people. One of the marvellous things about the Christian life is so exhilarating when we see, when we look back and we see how the Lord has worked out his purposes in our lives, the lives of our loved ones, the lives of all his people.

Well, that's the way it is. And it's not just that we find it difficult to understand. Our language is also incapable of communicating adequately about a God who is so above nature.

That's why the scripture writers so often say like. God is like this. Remember in the great book of Revelation talking about what it's like, what God is like as he sits on the throne in the heavens.

[17:35] Revelation chapter 4 verse 3 and what does John say? And the one who sat there had the appearance of Jasper. There's no point in thinking exactly about what Jasper's like to get an idea of what God is like.

it's just beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend it. And so even the people who are divinely inspired by the Lord have to say like this, like that, the appearance of this or the appearance of that.

We're grappling with something you see for human language breaks down. And we're only able to say where we catch glimpses of God. When we talk at scripture as a whole we're able to define it much better.

that one of the great things about eternity is going to be getting to know the Lord better in all his marvellous attributes, his characteristics. But God isn't completely incomprehensible or uncomprehensible because God has given us the scriptures and they tell us so much about what he's like.

Although we'll never know him fully or exhaustively ever because even glory will be the experience of getting to know him better. So there in verse 34 now Paul wonders at the greatness of God.

[18:56] Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? And really what Paul is doing is stating that and then just bowing down in worship.

Who could ever suggest anything that God has not thought of first? Therefore because of that, verse 35, whoever has ever given to God that God should repay him.

No one can call God to account or require God to settle his accounts with them fairly because at the end of the day we can't understand the Lord fully.

Paul then bows in awe at the depths of God's knowledge and his wisdom, his marvelous salvation of the human race, the miracle of justification, our sanctifying identification with the Lord, the victory of the Christian life, the mystery of God's dealings with Israel and all these things, Paul, if you like, could pile them up, but he doesn't.

He just acknowledges that there is nothing else for man to do but to worship God for his knowledge and his wisdom, which fills us with mystery and also hope for the future.

[20:23] So that's the first thing I think we need to note from these verses. A believing heart expresses wonder at God and his providences and his dealings, just like the Apostle Paul does.

And if that's what the Apostle Paul has to do, then surely we should be doing it as well. So that's verses 33 to 35. The believing heart expresses wonder.

But that's not always verse 36. For from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be the glory forever. And I want to suggest that this verse tells us that there's something that we must do.

The believing heart makes an appropriate affirmation. It's not just enough to recognize that this is the way it is with God in relation to us, that we can't fully understand what he does.

We have to affirm something as a result. So Paul closes on this note of praise and adoration, and it's really one of the most uplifting expressions of praise and adoration I think that's anywhere in the whole Bible.

[21 : 40] And you young people, can I say something here? Can I ask you about your prayers? When you pray, do you just ask God for things? Or in your prayers do you, well, do you praise him for who he is and for what he's done for you?

That's what you should do first, you know, when you pray. Don't just ask him for things. Give him thanks for who he is, what a great God he is, and how his great love for you. And give him thanks for what he's done for you. And then go on to ask him about the things that you need. That's something we should all do, isn't it, of course. Well, verse 36, for from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be the glory forever.

What that means, or the first part of it means this, I think, all comes from him, all lives by him, all ends in him. Those are the three things, I think, which, that's if you like just to paraphrase it.

Let's look at these three things. For from him, all comes from him. Now, there was a time when there was nothing but God.

[23 : 01] Matter, created mind, all these things are as, were as yet unmade or not yet born. There was no sun, but yet the Lord created, the Lord lived in light inexpressible, as the scriptures tell us.

There was no earth, heaven, but yet the throne of God stood firm and fast. There was no heaven, but the Lord's glory was absolutely unbounded, absolutely unrestricted.

God was completely self-sufficient. That's why when Moses said, what will I tell the Israelites, what will I say to the Israelites about who sent me?

And you get that marvellous statement, tell them, I am who I am, I am has sent you. The more we think about that expression, that definition, that name, really, the more incredible it becomes, and the more meaningful it becomes.

God's That was God's unqualified statement of what a philosopher might call his independent being. God was complete, and everything came from him.

[24 : 26] The first idea came from God himself. No one could have suggested anything to him, because there was no one there to suggest anything to him.

nothing in the minute aspects of life. There were no atoms, no molecules, none of those things which I don't understand, which make up the atom I gather.

And on the grand scale, there was nothing in the universe that we can identify either. No supernovas, and no pulsars, and all these things that the astronomers talk about.

There was only God. And then God created from nothing. Ex nihilo, as the scholars like to say.

John chapter 1, verse 3, through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made. Paul says a similar thing in Colossians chapter 1.

[25 : 36] I think Colossians is sometimes one of the neglected epistles of Paul, you know. I myself haven't read it as much as I read some of the other ones, I have to confess. Chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, for by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him.

He is before all things and in him all things hold together. Matter is not God, but God is in everything and nothing works or exists except through his might.

One of the things that seems to be making more of an impact, even I gather in them on people like Richard Dawkins, the great atheist, can't quite explain how it is that there is such an infinitesimal margin for error in the way the world works.

Can't quite explain that it seems. It's all so marvelously put together and the world can tolerate so little going wrong.

The argument from design, intelligent design. I'm not a scientist, I can't say anything much more about it than that, but that seems to be the thing that's being noticed here in this section by Paul.

[27 : 14] Everything is from God. And then secondly in verse 36, to him are all things.

Everything in the work of creation is to him. Because there was none other but himself and none equal to himself, himself and his motive for creation and was to do of necessity with himself, it was to his glory.

You know, some people say, oh, what sort of God do you have? Everything works for his glory. what about us here on earth? But you see, that doesn't go far enough back.

We need to go back to the time when there was nothing else but God. What else could he do but was to his glory? And in view of that, what more can we ask but for ourselves to be part of his glory?

That's the great promise he makes. God chooses his people for his inheritance. And putting it the other way as the psalmist does, God is of our inheritance and cut the portion and what more could you want than that?

[28 : 36] What more could you want? To be part of the glory of the infinite eternal creator who brought everything into the world when there was nothing.

There is glory. God's glory is his highest aim and the day is coming when we shall see indeed that all things are in him, to him, as Paul has it here.

And just as it is the case with creation, so too it is, it's the case with our own salvation. Salvation is from him, from God. God ordained the plan.

God ordained the hour it was promised. The moment that the Lord Jesus should come, when he should be born, what death he should die, and when he should rise and ascend, and when he will come again.

And he's elected the heirs of salvation, and he calls the heirs of salvation, you and me, to eternal life. some of you know that, you've experienced it and it's not in its fullness yet, but you've tasted it and you know it's marvellous.

[29 : 54] And some of you here perhaps haven't tasted it yet, you don't know what it's like yet. But let me assure you, Paul found it marvellous, every person when they're converted finds it marvellous, and you'll find it marvellous too if you put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when you look at it like that, how futile it is to talk about searching for God. I think we noticed that, mentioned that with the young people this morning, didn't we?

It's just so inappropriate to talk about men's and women's searching for God. Salvation is from him and to him, and it's also through him, through him.

the third thing. Through him came the prophecies. Through him the Son was born. Through him came the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, making peace between God and man. Through him too, the word is preached. Salvation is ultimately to him. And in view of that, how can anyone give a single word of praise to man or to angels or to any other being, because they will be silenced forever.

[31 : 19] Well-known words of Paul in Philippians chapter 2. We all know them. Read them again nonetheless. Philippians chapter 2, verses 9 to 11.

Therefore God exalted him, the Lord Jesus Christ, to the highest place, gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

Every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. God when you think about it, what other alternative is possible?

What other alternative is appropriate? That's why I say the believing heart, the heart of the true believer, must make and does make an appropriate affirmation when they think of the Lord's greatness.

From him are all things. What do we have, any of us, that he hasn't given us? Through him are all things. What can we do without him?

[32 : 25] To him are all things. Who else or what else deserves the highest honour? There's no possible answer but the one that Paul gives.

You know, we might not understand the fullness of God's purposes. Of course we don't. but you know, it's not some mystery of meaninglessness.

It's not. And we're not living in a world where God acts in a narbitrary, unpredictable way in which he exerts his omnipotent power.

And everything that surrounds the life that we lead is nothing else than living life in the presence and under the gaze of the good and merciful and faithful God.

The last part of verse 36 tells us, to him be the glory forever, may it be so. Paul tells us that our ultimate devotion is to be the Lord.

[33 : 40] To him be the glory forever. And can I conclude by just saying that God's glory should be our soul and constant desire?

Can I say to you parents that to this end you should raise your families, all of us as parents must do that? To this end we should focus all the prosperity that God gives us and in this part of the world where we live he's given us huge amounts of prosperity hasn't he?

And to this end, to the end of God's glory, we ought to live our entire lives. It's the case isn't it?

May with Paul we be enabled to say Amen to every single word that's in verses 33 to 36 and may we be doing everything for God's glory because that's what's appropriate.

May he enable us to do that. Let us pray. Lord our gracious God we acknowledge your goodness to us and we acknowledge your sovereignty in the life of all of us.

[34 : 56] We acknowledge your goodness and grace in our souls conveyed through the Holy Spirit the atonement and the blessings that flow from that of the Lord Jesus Christ.

May it be the case Lord that for every single one of us not just that you would choose us or what great and more marvellous thing can there be but we pray Lord that you would enable us to choose as it were yourself too.

And may we be caught up and bound up in this great truth that the glory of God is the greatest thing there is.

May it be so for us all and even if we can't express it adequately may we experience it. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.