

Prayer as Worship: Praise for God's Wisdom

Romans 11:33-36

Zach Hedges, *Clearcreek Chapel*

Introduction

Good evening! Well, if you're wondering what I'm doing up here getting ready to preach, that makes two of us... For those of you who don't know me my name is Zach Hedges, and I'm *not* one of the elders here at the Chapel...I think I'm actually more of a "*younger*," if you know what I'm saying...but Pastor Russ and the elders have *very* graciously invited me to speak to you a few times in this series, and so I'm really, honestly *thrilled* to open the Word with you here tonight, and very thankful for the opportunity they've given me.

We are continuing a series that is looking at the prayers that Paul makes within several of his letters in the New Testament. And the prayer we'll be considering tonight is from Romans 11, verses 33-36. But I think this prayer is *unique* in a number of ways from some of the others we've seen so far. One reason is that in this prayer, Paul actually doesn't *ask* for anything. Just imagine that...a prayer that doesn't *ask* God for anything. Isn't that the whole *point* of praying? Well, maybe not...and this is why I think it's a great prayer for us to study in depth, and to see how it can serve as an instructive model for our *own* approach to prayer, and encourage us to incorporate some elements into our praying that possibly we've never considered before.

So as I said, what sets Paul's prayer in Romans 11 apart from many of his other prayers in the New Testament is that it is *purely* an expression of his joy. That's it! He isn't asking for anything. He isn't confessing sin. He isn't seeking God's will. Those are certainly all legitimate reasons for praying. But in this case Paul offers up an *exclamation* that is solely and exclusively aiming to *praise* God. To express amazement and adoration of him.

Now, don't get me wrong, I *understand* that no one in *this* room has ever struggled in any way to feel and express this kind of amazement and adoration to God in prayer. I mean, this *is* the Sunday night crowd, after all, right?...And so these things come very naturally and spontaneously to us. But let's just imagine, hypothetically, that we need some encouragement and instruction in thinking about *how* we actually get to the point where we have the desire and the ability to pray that way. And toward that end we'll look specifically at the way Paul models this in his amazement at God's *wisdom* in Romans 11.

Overview (first slide)

So, before we dive right into the text I want to set the stage for you at least a little. See, the tricky thing about Paul's prayer at the end of Romans 11 is that it comes at the end of Romans 11. And

as you might know, chapters 9 through 11 of Romans form one long, fairly complicated unit of thought within the book, full of some profound but very complex theological truths about God's *wisdom*. Now, I'm very grateful that Pastor Dan introduced us to some of these ideas last week—that's really going to help us understand what's going on in Chapter 11. Because it's as Paul comes to the **end of his reflections** on those truths that he suddenly wells up in amazement at the aspects of God's character that he sees revealed in those actions. And this in turn is what leads him to overflow with praise to God, to rejoice in the wonder of who God is and what he has done, and to realize that it has all been perfectly designed and orchestrated to enhance God's own glory. It's like Paul's heart is a cup under a faucet, gradually being filled with all this glorious truth about God's past actions and his perfect character, and now it's reached a point of fullness, so it's just gushing over, flooding *out* of his heart in the form of this prayer of *exclamation*.

That's the big-picture idea of what is going on in this text. And what we'll be doing tonight is *looking* at that end result—the prayer of praise Paul offers in Rom. 11:33-36, and not just looking at it, but asking ourselves, “Where did that *come* from? What *motivated* Paul's heart to respond in that way?” And then we'll consider how that example might inform our own prayer lives in some way.

So that is where we're going. Now, to get there, we'll have to spend at least a little bit of time reviewing the section of Paul's letter leading up to his prayer. That only makes sense, right? We want to understand what has *caused* him to react this way. When we see someone jumping up and down with excitement about something, our first impulse is not to try to imitate that exactly by jumping up and down *with* them at exactly the same pace and with exactly the same motions. No, our impulse is to ask that person, “What is going on? What has excited you like this?” And then, once we've seen it or heard it for ourselves, *then* we're motivated to express excitement in our *own* genuine, particular way.

So, with all that in mind, we want to first just *sweep* across Romans 9-11, to get a sense of it. Now obviously we don't have time to stop and take note of details along the way. And this is an incredibly rich and important and even controversial passage (so I appreciate Pastor Russ assigning it to me for my first sermon here)...so, it's difficult to move through it so quickly, but for the sake of time that's just what we have to do. So what we're going to see as we're tracking Paul's line of thought here is that he is **reflecting on God's actions** in chapters 9-11:32, and through that he's **recognizing God's attributes** in chapter 11 verses 33-35, and then because of all of *that* he's **rejoicing in God's acclaim** in verse 36. Some solid Clearcreek alliteration there, right? So once again, Paul reflects on God's actions, and that causes him to recognize God's attributes, which in turn leads him to rejoice in God's acclaim. If you like outlines, that's our overview.

Reflecting on God's Actions (9:1-11:32) (next slide)

So, starting in Chapter 9, and continuing all the way to Chapter 11 verse 32, Paul takes us on this grand, sweeping survey of God's *actions*. Now, you can sort of follow along in your Bibles if you like, but really for *this* part I just want you to sit back and try to get a *sense* of what Paul's doing here. Because in many ways he's telling a story that dates all the way back to eternity past and ends in eternity future. So we're covering a lot of ground here, and I don't want you to miss the forest for the trees. Even if they're wonderful trees that you should go back and study on your own sometime. Maybe listen to Pastor Russ's sermon series on Romans from a couple years ago. But for now, just let the flow of it sort of carry you along. And remember, Paul's main concern in this survey is to reflect on God's *actions*, on what he has done, and is doing, and will do in the future.

Beginning in Chapter 9 Paul remembers first that **God elected Israel**. He *chose* Israel. He made a **special covenant** with her that created a *relationship* between them, unlike any other people group in the world. He revealed himself to them by giving them a law—a system that made it possible for him to dwell among them. He taught them how to make sacrifices for violating that law—all looking forward to a day when he would provide a *true* sacrifice for their sins and make **a new covenant** with his people through the person and work of Christ. And in addition to all this, God made *promises* to his people that he *would* accomplish these things. He swore by the glory of his own name that he would faithfully complete them. This was all part of what it means for God to *elect* Israel.

These things alone would be enough cause for wonder. But they're even more amazing in light of the fact that Israel had done *nothing* whatsoever to deserve God's favor. God had chosen Jacob, and not Esau, when they were both in the womb of their mother, to be the father of his people, before either of them had even laid eyes on the world. Jacob certainly did nothing to earn God's blessing. It was purely a demonstration of God's grace. God later told Moses that "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." Even the Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites in Egypt was part of God's design, so that God's mercy on his people in the darkness of Egypt would shine forth that much more brilliantly.

Well, this could start to sound like some sort of injustice, or unfairness—except that God was the one who created all things in the first place. The great Potter who *spoke* the clay into being and then molded it with perfect skill and precision to accomplish his purpose. The purpose of bringing glory to his name.

That purpose was not deterred **when the Israelites proved to be faithless** to their Creator and Covenant God. It was God's intention from eternity past to include members of *every* tribe and tongue and nation among his true people. And **God warned the Israelites through his prophets** that soon his call to salvation would be extended to the *hopeless* gentiles. He said "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of

the living God.” Even in Israel’s stubborn rebellion, God would not be delayed in accomplishing his purpose of gathering a people to himself.

So we also see that God provided a righteousness by faith. God had *always* intended for his people to know him by faith, and not by works of the law. And in the midst of Israel’s blindness to this truth, God revealed it to the broader world. Righteousness by faith alone, faith in the completed, **atonement work of Jesus Christ.** God extended his grace to a people who had known nothing about it. While the Israelites insisted on establishing a righteousness of their own, Righteousness himself took on flesh and opened a door to the gentiles. He was crucified by his own people, but God raised him from the dead, and vowed to save *any* who would believe in his name, Jew or gentile, without distinction.

Then **God sent forth the message** of that salvation into all the earth, empowering apostles and disciples by his Spirit to preach the gospel to *all* people so that they might hear, and believe, and call on him and be saved.

And even as the nations received that good news and the church was built, **God still remained faithful to Israel**, patiently using their unbelief as an occasion to bring in the gentiles *and* stir up the Israelites to return to their God. He did *not altogether* reject his people, despite the unbelief of the vast majority of them.

God **preserved a remnant** of them, chosen by grace, and *not* on the basis of their works.

So, during this period of Israel’s rejection of the gospel, **God included the gentiles.** Paul compares this to an olive tree, with the covenant promises that God made with Abraham and the Israelites as the root of the tree. God cut off the *branches* of the tree—the Israelites who became fixated on establishing a righteousness of their own and rejected Christ when he came. In their place, **God “grafted in” new branches**—the wild olive shoots that were most of us, the gentiles. Through this act God displayed both his severity (to the Israelites) and his kindness (to the gentiles). And even still, he remained patient, giving the Israelites time and opportunity to believe in Jesus the Messiah for their righteousness.

So, it becomes clear that from the very beginning, from eternity past, God had established a plan for providing a way of salvation for *all* people, Jew and gentile, using even the unbelief of one as an opportunity to foster belief among the other. In the words of Paul, **“God consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”**

Now it’s here, at the very end of this incredible overview of God’s master plan of redemption, with its ancient foundations, its multiple layers of fulfillment, and its unexpected twists and turns, never being delayed or obstructed in the slightest way by human wickedness and rebellion, it’s at the end of all this that Paul can only throw up his hands and exclaims in Chapter 11 verse 33, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!”

We've spent this time surveying chapters 9-11 because I wanted us to really have a sense of the *reason* for Paul's prayer of praise in verses 33-36, especially as we're thinking about how it might be instructive for our own prayer.

Recognizing God's Attributes (11:33-35) (next slide)

We've summed up chapters 9-11 as Paul's reflections on God's actions. Now we see that his meditation on God's actions leads him to recognize God's attributes in verses 33-36. Now, this is nothing new to us. We make judgments all the time about people's attributes on the basis of the actions we perceive. So we might say that someone who tells great jokes is "hilarious." A student who answers a tough question correctly is "brilliant." A soldier killed in combat is "heroic." We do this very automatically. And Paul is doing the same thing here. So as I read his prayer here, listen specifically for the *attributes* of God that he mentions as a result of having just reflected and meditated on God's actions.

[Read 33-35]

I'm sure they weren't hard to pick out. Paul begins by exclaiming, "**Oh, the *depth of...***" and then goes on to mention three main attributes in that slot.

First, the **riches of God**. The first thing that probably comes to mind here is wealth. And that's probably primarily what Paul *has* in mind. But in what sense is God "rich"? Where do his "riches" come from? Of course they are a result of his *ownership* over all things. He *owns* all things because he is the **Creator** of all things. Paul alluded to this when he compared God to a Potter, who has the right to do whatever he wants with the clay he has made. So God's *sovereignty* is also in view here. It's his power to do exactly as he pleases with his creation—without consulting it first.

But the richness of God also flows from his position not just as the Creator but also as the **King**. We saw this on powerful display in Paul's discussion of God's election of Israel. In adopting them as his people, God established his rule over them as their God and their King. He promised to protect them and to *provide* for them, and one day to dwell in their midst forever.

And of course we who are *not* Israelites know that God's richness is revealed through his role as Creator and King, yes, but also, and most precious, as **Redeemer**. In the salvation that God has provided on the basis of Christ's blood, we can receive a righteousness that is not our own, and experience the richness of God's *mercy and love*. The forgiveness of sin means that Christ has opened a fountain of mercy that is deeper than we will ever know.

These are just three manifestations of God's "riches" that Paul may have in mind here. I'm sure there are others that might occur to us if we continued reflecting on God's actions the way he does.

But secondly, Paul recognizes the **wisdom of God**. This might be the one that is easiest for us to see after surveying chapters 9-11. The sheer *genius* of God's **redemptive plan** is staggering. To think that he had established such an incredibly complex strategy for bringing maximal glory to his name from *all* the peoples of the earth, before he had even spoken the earth into being! He chose the nation of Israel to be his people, despite the fact that they were otherwise small and insignificant and very much inclined to unbelief. He *used* that unbelief as an opportunity to extend the message of salvation to the *gentiles*, who knew nothing about him. And *then* in turn, he used the inclusion of the gentiles to provoke Israel to jealousy so that at least a remnant of them might be restored as well! And all of this was part of God's overarching **purpose to pour out his mercy** on all people, so that his name might be *glorified* among all people. As Paul writes in another place, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

And thirdly, Paul recognizes the **knowledge of God**. This idea might seem very similar to the wisdom of God, and there is probably some overlap. We should remember that Paul is being poetic, even lyrical in the way he prays here. But the focus in this word is probably on the **omniscience** of God. He is the God who declares the end from the beginning. And the next few phrases, which are actually quotations from the Old Testament, unpack what Paul means. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" There *is* no knowledge that God does not already possess. So then who are we, as finite creatures who know *nothing* by comparison, to question any of his decisions? God's ways are entirely trustworthy because his knowledge is perfectly complete.

This is exactly what leads Paul to ask in verse 35, "who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" In his infinite knowledge God is completely **autonomous**, relying on nothing and no one outside of his own knowledge to help determine his actions. I'm reminded of Tim Keller's quote that "we can be sure our prayers are answered precisely in the way we would *want* them to be answered if we knew everything God knows." How much better would it be, then, to seek to align our own "counsel" with the purposes that God is already accomplishing in our lives?

Paul also goes on to ask "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" Here again we see the absolute **independence** of God. The fulfillment of his purposes requires nothing. It's been said that we contribute nothing to our salvation except the sin that makes it necessary. God created the universe out of nothing and he redeems his people out of nothing but the death and resurrection of his Son. He is indebted to no one, and so his plans and his purposes are dependent on no objective but his own: his unyielding quest to enhance the glory of his own name in all the earth. And with the coming of Christ that quest is well on its way to completion.

Rejoicing in God's Acclaim (11:36) (next slide)

Well, that idea leads us very naturally to the third and final stage of Paul's meditation. He began by reflecting on God's actions. That led him to recognize God's attributes. And now we see the end result of that process: in verse 36 he rejoices in God's acclaim.

This is the true reason, from God's perspective and I hope ours, for all theology—the worship of God himself. I had the chance to hear John Piper speak at my school Southern Seminary about a year or two ago and he said something that has been ingrained on my mind ever since: he said, “You will not waste your seminary years if you solidify the lifelong habit of thinking about the truth of God as a means of delighting in the God of truth.” And of course that does not just apply to seminary students but to *all* believers, to all people who study the truth of God in the form of theology or even the Word of God itself. Paul is demonstrating here in Romans that the *point* of theology is *worship*! We study the actions and attributes of God *not* to fill our heads but to fill our hearts, and to fill them to the point of *overflowing* in exactly the way Paul's heart does in these verses. John Stott says in his commentary on this passage, “. . .there should be no theology without doxology [or worship]. There is something fundamentally flawed about a purely academic interest in God. God is not an appropriate object for cool, critical, detached, scientific observation and evaluation. No, the true knowledge of God will *always* lead us to worship, as it did Paul. Our place is on our faces before him in adoration.” (John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 312).

And in the last verse, verse 36, we see this play out. “For from him and through him and to him are all things.”

First, God is the **source**. “*From him* are all things.” We've seen this already in the idea that he creates. He elects. He sovereignly determines and orders all things. Apart from him there is nothing. These acts of creation and election have their root in the will of God the Father, who has ordained them from eternity past.

Secondly, God is the **means**. “*Through him* are all things.” Jesus Christ himself, God the Son, is the agent of both creation and redemption. It is *through* him that the Father accomplishes his purposes. As we've seen, God's independence means that he requires nothing and no one outside of himself to achieve them.

And thirdly, God is the **purpose**. “*To him* are all things.” By the power of God the Spirit, the Father's redemptive plan, accomplished through the Son, is *applied* to the lives of God's people, who become a living temple of the Spirit and, through him, offer praise back to the glory of God's name.

From him, through him, and to him are all things. Why? The last sentence explains it very simply and clearly. “**To him be the glory forever. Amen.**” The acclaim of God's name—the promotion of his glory—this is the ultimate purpose behind all of God's actions, and the culmination of all of his attributes, and it should be the end result of all our prayer.

Application (next slide)

Well, we have covered a lot of ground. I hope you're still with us. And if you're exhausted, I hope it's in a good way, because I imagine that Paul himself, when he finished exclaiming this prayer, maybe slumped back in his chair to soak it all in for a moment. And maybe let his scribe catch up with him.

But this series is **on prayer**, and so in closing as we respond to this text I want to offer a few thoughts about the way it informs and instructs us in that area *specifically*. As I've said already, I believe we have a model here.

A wonderful place for our prayers to begin is in **reflection on God's actions**. Take time to **meditate on his deeds**. If you're having trouble thinking of some, just flip open your Bible. The pages of Scripture are filled to the *brim* with the mighty, saving actions of our God, and he's recorded them for a reason. Let the Word of God remind you that he created the universe, a beautiful paradise for humanity, showed mercy when they rebelled, called Abraham out of the pagan darkness, made a covenant with Israel to dwell in their midst, established an eternal throne for the descendants of David, remained faithful to his people even in the judgment of their exile, promising them a new covenant, and then fulfilled *all* these promises and many more in sending his own son to atone for sin, raising him from the dead and exalting him to the right hand of the Father. Reflect too on the actions that are still to come: the return of Christ, the final defeat of sin and death, the raising of the dead, the glorification of God's people, the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, and the restoration of all things.

Once we've spent some time *really* reflecting on these incredible actions, we will be led quite naturally to **recognize God's attributes** in them. His power, his splendor, his creativity, his majesty. His mercy, his grace, his faithfulness, his patience. His kindness, his generosity, his humility, and his glory. The list could go on. **Consider how God's character** was displayed and demonstrated in the actions he took then, and how that same character is revealed to us now, *especially* in light of the person and work of Christ. Delve deeper into the implications of that character and those actions for *you, here, now*. And for your eternal future.

I think if we follow this outline, using the Word of God as our basis and relying on the Spirit of God as our guide, reflecting on God's actions and recognizing God's attributes, we *will* come to the same destination as Paul at the end of Romans 11. We will be moved, naturally and organically and *truly*—to **rejoice in God's acclaim**. To pray in a way that **glorifies his name**. There can be no other response when God's people *really* begin to understand and appreciate the nature and the purpose and the power of all that he has begun to do and will soon finish doing in Christ. As this becomes clear to us, we will find our hearts overflowing with praise, and our prayers exclaiming, with Paul,

“From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Let's pray toward that end right now.