

Sermons through

Romans

His Unsearchable Judgments

Romans 11:33-36

With Study Questions

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Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?"

³⁶ For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

Introduction

My wife enjoys hiking. She's done many hikes; some very challenging. Every now and then I'll join her on one of the less taxing journeys. While hiking it is important to watch your footwork lest you trip or take a wrong trail and end up walking off the edge of a cliff. But every now and then you hit a place in the trail where it is time to stop and look up – to marvel at the view.

This is one of those places in Paul's journey. It's as if, in his very own writing, he begins to truly see what he, by the Spirit, has written. And it's time to stop and worship – to burst forth in doxology (glorious saying). It is worth noting that the very things that are troubling to the natural mind and even vexing to some believers (the sovereignty and incomprehensibility of God) detonate praise in the apostle.

Hopefully it is not an unrealistically ambitious task to get a running start at this doxology by reviewing the three chapters leading up to it. But this is our goal this morning. What has the Apostle Paul been writing for three chapters that culminate in this eruption of praise – and lead into the **"Therefore"** of chapter 12?

A Survey of Romans 9-11

At the risk of going too far back, it must be noted that Romans 9-11 answers the natural questions/objections that Romans 8 instigates and Romans 9:6 addresses directly. In Romans 8 Paul assigns to the church all those blessings of the Old Covenant that were given to Israel (the Holy Spirit, a future resurrection, the designation of being sons and daughters, an inheritance, those who are chosen of God, a promise they will never be forsaken, etc.). In Romans

9:6 we see Paul anticipate, and begin to answer the objection: **“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect” (Romans 9:6).**

This section of Romans does not begin with Paul’s apologetic for the faithfulness of God as much as an expression of his own grief at the wayward condition of his fellow Israelite. Though their crosshairs were at his throat, this entire section must be read in light of the **“great sorrow and continual grief” (Romans 9:2)** in his heart for his **“countrymen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:3).**

This highly doctrinal section of Scripture does not begin with a professor at a chalkboard but with a pastor whose grief and sorrow for the lost – even the lost who sought to inflict him – were driving influences in his heart and life. As the Psalmist wrote:

My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law (Psalm 119:136).

They had been the covenant people of God – the church of old through whom Christ Himself, according to the flesh, came into the world (Romans 9:1-5). Their hard-heartedness was a source of grief for Paul – a disposition we should imitate. But it doesn’t take long for Paul to begin to explain what they had missed – the distinction of flesh and promise.

Flesh and Promise

The word of God had not failed, they were simply confused about to whom the promises of God were made: **“For they are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Romans 9:6).** He places his pointer on things they had read but somehow missed. Even in the Old Covenant it was always a matter of promise over ethnicity or flesh.

Not every descendant of Abraham was a child of God – Ishmael was a child by flesh but it was Isaac was the child of promise – even though he was the younger (Romans 9:6-9). If someone objected that Ishmael was not the son of Sarah, Paul moves to the next generation. Rebecca and Isaac had twins but the older would serve the younger. Jacob would be the child of promise and Esau would be hated of God (Romans 9:10-13).

Paul begins to present a level of God’s sovereign election that must have been a source of consternation for his readers – as it continues to be today. God’s decrees – His decisions – are eternal, that is they are made in eternity

past. His choice of Jacob over Esau was before they were born, before they had done good or evil, that the **“purpose of God according to election might stand” (Romans 9:11)**. In this teaching Paul anticipates the natural objection.

The Natural Objection

“Is there unrighteousness with God” (Romans 9:14)? Paul again answers this objection with words from the Old Testament with which they should have been familiar; when He had explained to Moses His prerogative to place His compassion and mercy where He saw fit – that in an ultimate sense it does not depend on him who wills or runs but on God (Romans 9:15, 16).

Seeking to further enhance their appreciation of the sovereignty of God, the Apostle will now will teach that the sovereign choices of God extend beyond the covenant people – even to the very pagan leaders who would oppress them – to Pharaoh (Romans 9:14-18)!

Solomon wrote:

The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1).

Later I came upon the words of the Psalmist:

The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man; ¹⁴from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, ¹⁵he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds (Psalm 33:13, 14).

Paul continues to anticipate an objection – an objection that would only come from those who actually understood the implications of what he had been teaching; an objection many of us have heard a thousand times.

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will” (Romans 9:19)?

And here, as if to remind us that we are creatures, compares us to pots and Himself to the potter (Romans 9:20-24). It has been said that man, made in the image of God is God’s most glorious creative achievement – nothing in all of

creation compares – not the stars, the sun, the moon or the seas; it is man who is fearfully and wonderfully made. But we must ever be reminded that we are the creature and not the Creator. It is when men forget that that theological, political, moral, cultural disaster ensues.

Extending the Borders

Paul then moves from a discussion of God's sovereign freedom and election to what God had said He would do. In Romans 9:25-29 Paul reminds His readers that it was always His plan to extend redemption beyond the borders of Israel. People who were not His people would be called His people. It would only be a remnant of the Israelites who would be saved. They should never have thought themselves inherently superior to other people – had it not been for God promise to bring the seed (Christ) through them, they would have ended up like Sodom and Gomorrah (Romans 9:29).

At the end of chapter nine he begins to hit on the critical issue of the **“righteousness of faith” (Romans 9:30)**. The big problem, the problem which to this day separates the Christian faith from all other pursuits of God, is that righteousness comes not by works but by faith – faith in Christ. Christ had become a stumbling stone and rock of offense. But to some – to those who believe – He would become the means by which they would never be put to shame (Romans 9:30-33).

Paul's Prayer

In chapter ten we are again reminded of Paul's desire and prayer that Israel be saved. They were zealous but ignorant. Like men tend to do, they wanted to establish their own righteousness rather than submit to the righteousness of God. They did not grasp that the purpose of the law was Christ (10:1-4).

Paul informs his readers that it was Christ who ascended to heaven and descended to the abyss – there is no need to look further. All that is needed for our redemption has been fulfilled in Him (10:5-9). We are simply called to believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead and confess His lordship that we might be saved. God is not a respecter of persons – whoever calls on His name shall be saved. Our job is to send preachers to preach the gospel of peace (10:8-15).

Faith comes by hearing, but not everyone who hears will necessarily believe. Paul begins to teach that though Israel had heard the news, they were a **“disobedient and contrary people” (Romans 10:21)**. But did this mean that God had **“cast away His people” (Romans 11:1)**? Paul begins to address this in chapter 11.

His People

In chapter 11 Paul uses himself as an example of God’s faithfulness. He was a Jew and he had not been cast away. During the time of Elijah and even during Paul’s present time there was a remnant of those who were truly God’s elect (Romans 11:5) – those whom He foreknew (Romans 11:2). They were children of promise not merely flesh **“otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Romans 11:1-6)**.

Paul once again appeals to the sovereignty of God in both opening and closing eyes and ears (Romans 11:7-10), giving **“a spirit of support” (Romans 11:8)**.

Jealousy

In the middle of chapter 11 Paul explains that the apostasy of Israel was not to the level of reprobation – they had not stumbled that they should fall. There was hope for them. Salvation coming to the gentiles would provoke a jealousy in them that some might be saved (Romans 11:11-15).

Paul warns the gentiles Christians not to be boastful. They are included by grace through faith and it would be very natural for God to bring Israelites back into covenant with Him. When churches forget their need for grace they may find themselves cut off (Romans 11:16-22). We must ever consider the **“goodness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22)**.

God is Able

Paul goes on to explain in Romans 11:23-32 that God is able to graft the Israelite back into covenant with Him if they do not continue in unbelief. Israel’s blindness was never full or final. They were blinded that the Gentiles would be brought in, through jealousy the natural branches would be re-grafted and **“so all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26)**.

God is the one who commits to disobedience and obedience in order for Him to display His mercy on all who are His. He is faithful to His covenant. Sometimes we think things should unfold a certain way. We try to make sense of the way life goes and from our creaturely perspective we come up short.

Unsearchable Yet Glorious

God's plan of redemption is according to His infinite power, glory and wisdom. Our minds cannot plumb its depth nor can we in any sense improve upon it or require some sort of recompense or remuneration.

Sometimes you see artists on stage painting a picture to music. The strokes seem random even reckless. It's difficult to tell what they're painting. I saw one that even when it was done I couldn't make it out. Then the artist turned it over and one could see that it was a beautiful portrait that had been painted upside down.

Then it is as if that artist freely hands the work to some unworthy, skeptical – even critical member of the audience. This is the great menagerie of redemption. And Paul finishes with a doxology – a doxology which accentuates the incomprehensibility of His wisdom, His judgments and His grace; a doxology in which we are called to appreciate the centrality of His being.

It is lamentable that the things people might admire and extol other people for are the very things that the natural man clamors about when assigned to God.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out (Romans 11:33)!

If we were to sit in a room with an Augustine, an Aquinas, an Edwards, an Einstein or Hawking we might admire their top-shelf discussions as we sit silently in the corner on the floor – knowing that in a thousand lifetimes, if we held a hundred degrees from fifty institutions of higher learning our minds would still come up short. Yet it is in the nature of man to shake his fist at a God who, though He condescended to become a man that He might save us, remains...

...infinite in being, (Exod. 3:14, Job 11:7-9) glory, (Acts 7:2) blessedness, (1 Tim. 6:15) and perfection; (Matt. 5:48) all-sufficient, (Gen. 17:1) eternal, (Ps. 90:2) unchangeable, (Mal. 3:6, James 1:17) incomprehensible, (1 Kings 8:27) every where present, (Ps. 139:1-13) almighty, (Rev. 4:8) knowing all things, (Heb. 4:13, Ps. 147:5) most wise, (Rom. 16:27) most holy, (Isa. 6:3, Rev. 15:4) most just, (Deut. 32:4) most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. (Exod. 34:6)¹

It angers the natural mind to bow before His Maker, but for Paul it generated doxology.

*“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?”
35 “Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him” (Romans 11:34, 35)?*

We tend to view Romans 9-11 as containing flagship passages for Calvinism and eschatology (especially as it relates to Israel); and it certainly addresses those issues. But they are mere sub-points. What Paul has labored through these (and truly all) chapters can be summed up in verse 35, and that is we simply have nothing to offer God that He should repay us.

We cannot plead our ethnicity, our wisdom, our humility, our goodness, our self-control, our brokenness, or even our ability to make a right choice. The creature is entirely as the mercy of the Creator. Again something that angers the desired autonomy of the natural man whose **“pride serves as their necklace...(who) speak loftily (and) set their mouths against the heavens” (Psalm 73:6, 8, 9)**. All we offer to the equation of redemption is our sin. And, as if in crescendo – prior to the **“Therefore”** of chapter twelve, Paul nudges us just one step closer to that vantage point which helps us make sense of the human experience.

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:36).

All things come from (*ek*) Him and through (*dia*) Him. There was nothing and He made everything. As John wrote elsewhere:

¹ *The Westminster larger catechism: with scripture proofs.* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made (John 1:3).

And all things are directed to Him – **“to whom be the glory forever.”** This is the perspective by which all things must be observed. The chief end of all things is the glory of God. Again, the natural man endlessly wrangles against this, but Paul rejoices as should we – keeping in mind what Paul had written elsewhere – words for our hearts to ponder as we prepare for the Table.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.

¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

Questions for Study

1. What did the Apostle do from time to time as he contemplated the very words given to him by God (pages 2, 3)?
2. Have you noticed that those things which are troubling to the natural mind are glorious to believers? Explain (page 2).
3. What do Romans 8 and Romans 9:6 tell us about why Paul is writing chapters 9-11 (pages 2, 3)?
4. How does Paul begin this section? What do we learn? What are ways we can respond more appropriately to our surroundings (page 3)?
5. What points does the Apostle Paul make in regard to flesh versus promise (page 3, 4)?
6. What is the natural objection to a solid presentation of God's sovereignty and how does Paul answer it (pages 4, 5)?
7. What was God's ultimate plan regarding redemption? What disposition must people be mindful of? What critical issue does Paul mention in Roman 9:30 (page 5)?
8. What was Paul's desire for Israel? What was their error (pages 5, 6)?
9. How does Paul answer the accusation that God had forsake His people? Explain the interaction between the Jews and Gentiles regarding how God would save (blinding, jealousy, etc.) (pages 6, 7).
10. Explain how the very things which offend the natural mind are a source of joy and glory to the Apostle Paul (pages 7, 8).
11. What do we have to offer God? What vantage point makes sense of the human experience? How is this glorious (pages 8, 9)?