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GOD IS GREAT; YOU ARE NOT GREAT (Part 2)

Romans 11:33-36

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April 1, 2012

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Romans Lesson 74

God is Great; You are not Great (Part 2)
Romans 11:33-36

Marc Bolan, the late rock star of T Rex, once said, "If God came into my room, I'd obviously be awed, but I don't think I'd feel humble. I might cry, but I know he'd dig me like mad" (*No Matter How Thin You Slice it, It's Still Baloney*, ed. by Jean Arbeiter [Quill], p. 16).

We may dismiss such an outrageous statement because it came from a pagan rock star. But the mindset that pulls God down to our level and lifts us up so that we are almost on a par with the Almighty is not lacking in the evangelical church. I heard Pastor John MacArthur tell about a charismatic pastor friend of his who told John that Jesus often appeared to him in the morning while he was shaving. MacArthur was rightly taken aback, so he asked some questions to make sure that he understood this pastor correctly. The pastor assured MacArthur that Jesus Christ actually appeared to him often as he was shaving. MacArthur's final incredulous question was, "*And you keep shaving?*"

When the apostle John, who had known Jesus intimately during His earthly ministry, was on the Isle of Patmos, he had a vision of the risen Christ. His response was (Rev. 1:17), "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man." That is the common response of all in the Bible who had an encounter with the living God. They didn't say, "Hey, good to see you, God! How's it going?" Isaiah (6:5) cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Ezekiel (1:28) fell on his face. Samson's parents fell on their faces and the father, Manoah, thought that they would die because they had seen the Lord (Judges 13:20, 22). And when Paul was caught up into heaven and heard things that he was not permitted to speak, the Lord gave him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to keep him from exalting himself (2 Cor. 12:2-7).

As the apostle Paul contemplated how God designed and carried out His plan for salvation history, he was moved to this great

exclamation of praise that ends Romans 11. These verses serve as a conclusion and climax to the entire book so far, but especially to chapters 9-11. Specifically, Paul is responding to the thought of 11:32, "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all." By "all," Paul means "all groups of people," Gentiles and Jews alike. This leads him to be caught up in wonder and praise over God's riches, wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and ways. The lesson for us is:

Since God is far greater than you can comprehend and you are not great, humble yourself before God and worship Him.

The point of all the deep doctrinal truths of Romans 1-11 is to bring us to humble worship before our great God, who planned our salvation so that we would be to the praise of His glory and grace. If your study of theology doesn't lead you to deeper worship, you are not studying it correctly. Seeing more clearly who God is, who we are, and what He has graciously done for us in Christ should cause us to bow before Him in humble worship. Last time we saw:

1. God is far greater than you can ever comprehend.
 - A. God's riches are beyond comprehension.
 - B. God's wisdom is beyond comprehension.
 - C. God's knowledge is beyond comprehension.
 - D. God's judgments are beyond comprehension.
 - E. God's ways are beyond comprehension.

Today we are focusing on the truth that stems from the realization that God is far greater than you can ever comprehend:

2. You are not great.

The truth is, we all need to grow in humility. We need to realize that in comparison with God, we are nothing. Muhammad Ali, the former boxing champion, used to proclaim, "I'm the greatest." I recently saw him on the news, stumbling along a hospital corridor as he suffers the effects of Parkinson's disease. I thought, "How quickly any supposed human greatness fades!" I was also reminded of the story I read about when Ali was on a commercial flight. Just before takeoff the stewardess came by and told Ali to fasten his seat belt. "Superman don't need no seat belt," replied Ali. The

stewardess retorted, "Superman don't need no airplane, either." Ali fastened his belt (*The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, ed. by Clifton Fadiman [Little, Brown], p. 14).

In Romans 11:33 (ESV), Paul exclaims, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" Then, as he has done consistently in Romans, Paul supports his statements with Scripture. Verse 34 cites Isaiah 40:13, "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?" Verse 35 cites Job 41:11, "Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?" Both verses are rhetorical questions that expect the answer, "No one." While these verses support verse 33, which marvel at how great God is, they also challenge proud man by asking, "Would any of you dare to compare yourself with God?" They say, "You are not great in comparison with the Almighty!"

In the larger contexts of both Isaiah 40 and Job 41, God asserts His greatness by asking rhetorical questions that put man in his proper place. Note the contrasts between God's greatness and man's puniness in Isaiah 40:12-17:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales? Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and *who* gave Him understanding? And *who* taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.

In Job, God begins by asking Job (38:2), "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" He proceeds to hammer Job with question after rhetorical question, such as (38:4-5), "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements? Since

you know. Or who stretched the line on it?" In the verses just before Job 41:11 (cited in Rom. 11:35), God continues pounding Job by asking whether he can draw out Leviathan (in these verses, a crocodile) with a fishhook. God taunts (41:8), "Lay your hand on him; remember the battle; you will not do it again!" If neither Job nor anyone else cares to tangle with a crocodile, God concludes (Job 41:10b), "Who then is he that can stand before Me?" He then asks (41:11), "Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine."

I cite the contexts of these Old Testament verses to show that while Paul is still extolling the greatness of God, he also is saying by way of comparison, "You're not great!" Some scholars deny it, but it seems more than coincidental to me that the three rhetorical questions relate in reverse order to God's riches, wisdom, and knowledge: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" relates to God's knowledge. "Who became His counselor?" relates to His wisdom. And, "Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?" relates to His riches.

A. While God is great in knowledge, you're not great.

Rom. 11:34a: "For who has known the mind of the Lord?" As we saw last time, God's knowledge is exhaustive. He knows all that there is to know about every molecule and every thought in the universe. Jesus told us that God has the hairs on all our heads numbered. He knows every sparrow that falls to the ground (Luke 12:6-7). And, as we saw last time, He know only knows everything that has happened and will happen, but He also knows what would have happened if other factors had come into play (Matt. 11:21-24)! With David we can exclaim (Ps. 139:6), "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it."

Paul also cites Isaiah 40:13 in 1 Corinthians 2:16: "For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ." At first glance, the statement that we have the mind of Christ would seem to contradict our text, where Paul's point is that we can't know the mind of the Lord. But the two notions are compatible. As Thomas Schreiner explains (*Romans* [Baker], p. 636), in the context of 1 Corinthians 2, the main thesis "is that no one can know the mind and thoughts of God's Spirit apart from God's free and gracious revelation.... The theme in

Rom. 11 is remarkably similar. No human being has the wisdom or knowledge to discern (much less to advise) God on the course that human history should take.... Human beings cannot discern God's wise plan for history on their own, nor would they ever devise a scheme like God's." And yet (as Schreiner points out) in Romans 9-11, Paul has given us the main flow of God's plan for history, so that we can discern God's wisdom as we understand these truths.

So Paul's point is that while God has graciously revealed the broad flow of His plan for salvation history, none of us could have figured it out on our own if He had not revealed it. And so none of us can compare with God in our knowledge.

B. While God is great in wisdom, you're not great.

Rom. 11:34b: "Or who became His counselor?" The question is really kind of humorous. Can you imagine the Almighty God dropping in on you and saying, "I've been struggling with this problem and I wondered if you've got a few minutes that we could chat?" Can you imagine the Sovereign God meeting with some top advisors to lay out His plan for the ages? It's laughable! God does not need our counsel on anything!

And yet how often we give God advice about how He should run our lives or run the world! "God, if You would just do things my way, my life would be much smoother! If You would just change my wife or my kids, our home would be much more peaceful!" We often turn our prayers into complaints that imply that we have some advice that God needs to listen to! I often get emails telling me to pray for some important legislative issue. If the issue is clearly spelled out in Scripture, then I can pray that our government will act in line with God's moral standards. But I need to be careful not to presume to tell God how to run our country or the world. He has been doing that quite capably for centuries without my advice! So be careful when you pray!

C. While God is great in riches, you're not great.

Rom. 11:35: "Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?" As God adds (Job 41:11), "Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine." He owns the entire universe. He spoke it into existence for His own glory. If you could speak the word and a trillion dollars would legitimately appear in your bank ac-

count, you wouldn't need to get a minimum wage job at McDonald's. You'd be infinitely rich. The point is, we cannot give God anything that He lacks. We cannot meet some need of God's that He can't fulfill. He is totally sufficient in Himself alone. God is the supreme treasure in the universe.

This question, "Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?" shows that we cannot do anything for God or give anything to God that places Him in our debt. We can't pile up good works and then think that God owes us salvation. We can't give a pile of money to the church or to charity and think that somehow it will go well with us at the judgment, because we've earned God's favor. Any thought that God owes us something eradicates the biblical doctrine of grace that is at the heart of a relationship with God.

Even as Bible-believing Christians, it's easy to fall into this error. The popular early-20th century Bible teacher, Dr. R. A. Torrey, told of a time when he was at a meeting for businessmen in Australia when a note was handed to him. It said,

Dear Dr. Torrey, I am in great perplexity. I have been praying for a long time for something that I am confident is according to God's will, but I do not get it. I have been a member of the Presbyterian Church for thirty years, and have tried to be a consistent one all that time. I have been Superintendent in the Sunday School for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years; and yet God does not answer my prayer and I cannot understand it. Can you explain it to me?

Torrey read the note from the pulpit and replied, "It is very easy to explain it. This man thinks that because he has been a consistent church member for thirty years, a faithful Sunday School Superintendent for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years, that God is under obligation to answer his prayer. He is really praying in his own name, and God will not hear our prayers when we approach him in that way." Later a man came up to Torrey and admitted that he had written that note. He said, "You have hit the nail square on the head. I see my mistake" (R. A. Torrey, *The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power* [Zondervan], pp. 138, 139, cited by James Boice, *Romans* [Baker], 3:1462-1463).

The good news is that the way to receive from God is not to come to Him as if He owes you something, but rather to come as poor and needy. As Mary exclaims (Luke 1:53), "He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed." Come to God as rich and you get sent away empty; come as poor and you go away rich. (See, also, Rev. 3:17-18.)

Paul's thoughts that God is far greater than you can ever comprehend and that you are not great leads him to worship:

3. Therefore, humble yourself before God and worship Him.

Romans 11:36: "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." This verse has profound implications that I encourage you to meditate on. I can only scratch the surface here. John MacArthur sums it up (*The MacArthur Study Bible, NASB Updated Edition* [Thomas Nelson], p. 1683), "God is the source, the sustainer, and the rightful end of everything that exists." John Witmer puts it (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John F. Walvoord & Roy Zuck [Victor Books], 2:487), "God is the first Cause, the effective Cause, and the final Cause of everything." Leon Morris says (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 429), "Paul is speaking of God as the Originator, the Sustainer, and the Goal of all creation."

Everett Harrison (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 10:126) points out that while this verse has in view God's plans and operation in the history of salvation, it also applies to individual saints: "For that life has its source in God, lives by his resources, and returns to him when its course has been run." Paul asserts four things:

- A. All things are from God.

God created everything out of nothing by speaking the word (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, etc.; Ps. 33:6, 9; John 1:3). Immediately you may wonder, "Did God then create evil?" The biblical answer does not fit neatly into human logic, but we must maintain the tension. The Bible clearly affirms (1 John 1:5), "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13). "For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness" (Ps. 11:6).

On the other hand, God's eternal decree permitted evil in order to further His own glory. He ordained the cross, which was only necessary because of evil and only accomplished through evil (Acts 4:27-28). God says (Isa. 45:6b-7), "I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these." The Hebrew word translated "calamity" is the word for "evil." Jeremiah states (Lam. 3:37-38), "Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?" Amos (3:6b) asks rhetorically, "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?"

If you deny that evil was a part of God's decree, then you fall into the Zoroastrian heresy of dualism, that there are two equal powers, one good and one evil. But if you say that God is responsible for evil, you go against the biblical teaching that He is holy. It is a great comfort to hold to the biblical balance, that God is holy and He is sovereign over all things, including evil.

B. All things are through God.

He "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). He works all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28). This includes our trials, which are from God's loving hand for our discipline and for His glory. As Job said (1:21), "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Or as Job (2:10) asks his wife, "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?"

C. All things are to God.

This means that all things exist because of God's purpose and for His glory. Nothing exists that will not result in ultimate glory for Him. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism begins, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Thus,

D. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Do you want a happy marriage? Of course! But why? "So that I'll be happy!" That is secondary. Your primary desire for a happy marriage should be so that God is glorified. The same applies to rearing godly children or succeeding in your career or to any other

goal. Your main aim should be that Christ would be exalted through you, whether by life or by death (Phil. 1:20).

Charles Hodge nicely sums up Paul's teaching here (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 381): "It is the tendency of all truth to exalt God, and to humble the creature; and it is characteristic of true piety to feel that all good comes from God, and to desire that all glory should be given to God."

Conclusion

Don't forget the "Amen." Paul wants you to say "amen" to all that he has written thus far in Romans. "I am helplessly, hopelessly lost in my sin and I deserve God's holy wrath." Amen! "My only hope for eternal life is that Jesus Christ shed His blood for me while I was yet a sinner." Amen! "If He had not first chosen me, I never would have chosen Him." Amen! "I am justified by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone." Amen! "I now do not need to yield to sin, because I am identified with Christ in His death and resurrection." Amen! "He is now working all things, including my trials, together for my good because I now love Him and He has called me according to His glorious purpose." Amen! "He is now conforming me to the image of His Son, so that one day I will be glorified with Him forever." Amen!

We are not just grudgingly to submit to these truths, but to rejoice and glory in them. Do you? Can you say in all of your circumstances, "To Him be the glory forever. Amen"?

Application Questions

1. Is it wrong to take pride in our own or our children's accomplishments? What does biblical humility mean practically?
2. Where is the biblical balance between drawing near to God as our loving Father and yet fearing Him as the Holy One?
3. Since God uses trials to conform us to Christ, should we pray to get out of our trials? How should we pray about trials?
4. Some accuse those who affirm God's sovereignty over all of making Him the author of evil. How would you respond biblically to this charge?

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