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STAND IN AWE

Romans 11:28-32

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Romans Lesson 72

Stand in Awe
Romans 11:28-32

William Beebe was an explorer and a friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. Often when he visited the President, the two men would go outdoors at night to see who could first locate the Andromeda galaxy. Then as they gazed at the tiny smudge of distant starlight, one of them would recite, "That is the spiral galaxy of Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It is 750,000 light-years away. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun." After that thought had sunk in, Roosevelt would flash his toothy grin and say, "Now I think we're small enough! Let's go to bed." (*Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, by Paul Lee Tan [Assurance Publishers], # 2213.)

We now know that Andromeda is 2.6 million light years away and consists of one trillion stars, about twice the number of our galaxy. And while the numbers are only estimates and they keep getting larger, astronomers think that there are at least 100-200 billion galaxies, not 100 million. A German supercomputer simulation recently put that number at 500 billion (universetoday.com). Mr. Beebe and President Roosevelt would feel even smaller!

As the apostle Paul sums up Romans 11 in our text, he wants us to feel appropriately small in the presence of the Sovereign God who moves all of history according to His unfathomable ways for His own glory. Pastor John Piper (desiringGod.org, "God's Design for History: The Glory of His Mercy," italics his) sums up, "Romans 11:30-32 is the summary of the main point of this chapter, namely, that *God has designed and guided history—both its disobedience and its obedience—so that in the end it will most fully display the reliability of his promises and the magnificence of his mercy—to prevent human pride and produce white-hot worship.*"

Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 729-730) points out that verses 28-32 "recapitulate and wrap up the argument of chaps. 9-11 as a whole. Paul's assertion of Israel's dual status in v. 28 succinctly summarizes the dilemma that drives the whole argument of these chapters: the Israel now at enmity with

God because of the gospel is nevertheless the Israel to whom God has made irrevocable promises of blessing." Paul's point is:

We should stand in awe of God because He designs and controls all of history to display His faithfulness to His promises and the glory of His mercy to sinners.

Paul has been gazing through the telescope to get a glimpse of just how big God is, and he invites us to take a look for ourselves.

1. God designs and controls all of history.

Some might react to this statement by thinking that it denies our "free will." They would object, "Are we just robots that God has programmed to do what He has determined they should do?" But the biblical view is much more profound than this. While God controls all of history and moves it according to His sovereign purpose, He does so through humans who are free to make choices for which they are held responsible. For example, before human history began God ordained the cross. The cross was necessary because of human sin and it could only be implemented through sinful behavior. And yet at the same time, God is not responsible for sin and He holds sinners accountable for their sin.

In my Bible reading this week, I came to a verse that is a favorite of many, Jeremiah 29:11: "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'" It's a wonderful promise for God's people, especially those who are suffering. In the verse just before, God tells Jeremiah that after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, He will restore Israel to their land. In the following verses (29:12-13) He says, "Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find *Me* when you search for Me with all your heart."

Did you notice the interplay between God's sovereignty and human responsibility in those verses? God has a plan for His people and He will carry out that plan right on schedule. He is not restricted from carrying out His plan by what sinful people do. God's plan required that Cyrus the pagan king had to decide to let the Jews return to their land. The Jews had to decide to give up living in Babylon, where they had been born and reared, and to make the difficult, dangerous, and uncertain journey back to Israel. To do

that, they had to rely on God's promise that their future in Israel would be for their and their children's good. Furthermore, God declares that the Jews of that future generation will call upon Him, pray to Him, and seek Him with all their hearts.

So God had a plan and it was certain that He would accomplish His plan. The plan included the "free" decision of a sinful king and the "free" decision of the Jews to return to the land and seek the Lord. But when they freely chose these things, they were carrying out God's foreordained plan. And it was not that God merely *foresaw* these events. Rather, He designs and controls how things turn out to accomplish His purposes. But at the same time, He accomplishes His purpose through people who make real choices for which they are responsible.

John Piper outlines four broad stages of history (11:30-32):

(1) The time of Gentile disobedience, when God permitted the nations to go their own way. God described some of this history in advance to Abraham in a mind-boggling statement (Gen. 15:13): "God said to Abram, 'Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.'" Then God explains why Israel will spend four centuries in slavery in Egypt (Gen. 15:16), "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." That's amazing! Israel would spend four long centuries in slavery because the iniquity of the Amorite (the Canaanites) was not yet complete! When their sin was full to the brim, God freed Israel from slavery to Egypt and commanded them to execute His judgment on the wicked Canaanites.

Paul referred to this time of Gentile disobedience in a passing phrase in a sermon at Lystra (Acts 14:16), "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways . . ." I thought about that verse on Monday as we hiked to a remote spot below the North Rim of the Grand Canyon called "Shaman's Gallery." It is an extensive panel of rock art that some native shaman who did not know the living and true God put there perhaps 1,000 years ago. Why didn't he know God? Because in His unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways, God permitted the Gentiles to go their own ways.

(2) The time of Jewish disobedience, when they rejected their Messiah and He gave them up to hardness. As we saw last time, Israel brazenly rejected and crucified their Savior as they cried out (Matt. 27:25), "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" Although God had ordained the cross, He permitted the Jews to make that frightening choice and pronounce that curse on them and their children. That hardness has lasted for almost 2,000 years.

When Paul says (11:28), "From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake," he means that because God hardened the Jews, the gospel has now gone out to the Gentiles (see 11:11, 12, 15). "Enemies" probably means, "They are God's enemies" because of their sin and unbelief in rejecting their Messiah. But the staggering thing about God's judgment on the Jews is that if you had been born as a Jew in the past 2,000 years, unless you were a part of the remnant according to God's gracious choice (11:5), you would have lived and died hardened toward the good news about the Savior!

(3) The time of mercy shown to the Gentiles through the spread of the gospel to all nations—the fullness of the Gentiles. We are the recipients of God's mercy in this period as the gospel goes out to the nations. And yet, as I just mentioned in the case of the Native Americans who lived 1,000 years ago, they lived and died without hearing the gospel. Approximately 6,900 people groups are still in such spiritual darkness, waiting to hear the gospel (see my message "Good News for All," 1/29/12).

(4) The time of mercy on Israel as God completes his redemptive plan and takes away the hardening and saves the nation of Israel with a mass conversion to Christ. As I explained last week, this will probably happen either just prior to or at the time of the second coming of Jesus Christ. In 11:31, the second "now" is difficult, causing some manuscripts to omit it. But it is probably original. But how can the Jews *now* be shown mercy when it is still future? Probably Paul meant that now that the Gentiles have been shown mercy, the Jews were in position for this final phase of God's program. It could take place "now," at any time.

I need to emphasize that God's shutting up all in disobedience does not mean that He is responsible for sin. It has the idea of God giving the Gentiles over to the consequences of their sin (as in

Rom. 1:24, 26, & 28) and consigning the Jews to judicial hardening because of their sin (11:7-10). Just as He shut up these two groups to their sins, so He will show mercy to the two groups. But this does not mean that He will save everyone in those groups. Moo explains (*ibid.*, pp. 736-737), “He is saying that God has imprisoned in disobedience first Gentiles and now Jews so that he might bestow mercy on each of these groups of humanity.”

The Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter III, 1.) puts the biblical balance like this: “God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” The point is that without violating the free agency of sinners, God designs and controls all history for His sovereign purpose of glorifying His name. And so we should stand in awe of the Sovereign God of history.

2. God designs and controls all of history to display His faithfulness to His promises.

Romans 11:28-29: “From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of *God’s* choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” H. C. G. Moule (*The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* [Cambridge: University Press, 1903], p. 201, italics his) paraphrases,

With a view to the spread of the Gospel, which is the message of salvation for *every* believer, Jew or Gentile, (1:16) it pleased God in His sovereign plan to reject the great majority of the Jews—in order to open His kingdom wide to you. But with a view to the believing element, the elect Jews of every age, including the great multitude to be called to grace hereafter, the Jews are still dear to Him; for His Covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is sovereign and unchangeable.

Douglas Moo (*ibid.*, p. 729) says, “It is because God has chosen Israel to be his ‘beloved’ that he will bring salvation to the people in the last day.” He points out that “election” (in 11:28) refers not to salvation for every single Jew, but rather to God’s choosing

Israel as a nation in line with His covenant with the patriarchs. This status as God's chosen nation results in salvation only for those whom God individually chooses and calls in this age (the "remnant" of 11:5) and in the future ("all Israel" of 11:26).

When Paul says that Israel is "beloved for the sake of the fathers," he does not mean that the godliness of the patriarchs somehow stored up merit for their descendants. Nor did God choose the patriarchs because of something worthy in them. The Bible records that they all had many sins. Rather, Paul means that God will fulfill His promises to the patriarchs.

God's "gifts" (11:29) refers to the blessings enumerated in 9:4-5. His "calling" refers to God's calling Abram and promising to bless him and his descendants. In other words, it refers to God's choosing Israel as His special people. According to *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (F. Laubach, [Zondervan, 1975], ed. by Colin Brown, 1:357), "irrevocable" means, "In spite of the disobedience and hardening of men's hearts God will accomplish his purpose of salvation also in his people Israel." In other words, God will not go back on His covenant promises. He has designed history to display His faithfulness to His promises.

The practical benefit of this is that we can trust God's promises, including His promise to work even the most difficult trials together for our ultimate good (Rom. 8:28). But keep in mind that you may die without seeing the fulfillment of God's promises. Abraham died owning only a burial cave that he had bought with his own money, without realizing God's promise to give him the land of Canaan. But God's timing is not our timing. With God, a thousand years is as a day (2 Pet. 3:8), and so it's only been four days since Abraham's time! But when the final account of human history stands finished, we will see that God designed and controlled it all to display the complete faithfulness of His promises. We can count on His Word as true!

3. God designs and controls all of history to display the glory of His mercy to sinners.

Romans 11:30-32: "For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the

mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all."

By repetition Paul sets forth two themes: "Disobedient" (or, "disobedience") occurs four times. "Mercy" also occurs four times. John Murray (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], 2:102, italics his) observes, "It is only in the context of disobedience that *mercy* has relevance and meaning." Unless you realize the enormity of your own disobedience and sin, you will not appreciate the greatness of the gift of God's mercy.

In this sweeping summary of history there is a similarity and a difference (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 425). Both the Jews and the Gentiles are alike in that both groups were disobedient to God. But the difference is that in God's design for history, through the Jews' disobedience, the Gentiles came to experience God's mercy, but it will be through the Gentiles' experience of God's mercy that the Jews will finally come to know His mercy, too.

Morris (*ibid.*, pp. 424-425) also points out that it is significant that Paul does *not* say, "You were disobedient, but you have become obedient," but rather, "You have been shown mercy." He adds, "It is no human achievement of which he speaks, but a divine gift." God's mercy is similar to His grace, in that both represent His unmerited favor toward those who deserve His judgment. But the nuance of difference is that *grace* emphasizes God's favor in forgiving our sins because we are *guilty*, whereas *mercy* emphasizes His compassion on us because we are *miserable* (R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 170).

To repeat so that you are clear, Paul is not saying (in 11:32) that God will save everyone. Rather, in the context Paul is looking at the broad sweep of history and God's dealings with the Gentiles and the Jews as groups. He is saying that just as both groups were at various times cut off from God's mercy because of their disobedience, so both groups will experience His mercy as history unfolds. This does *not* imply that every individual in each group will be saved, which would contradict what Paul says elsewhere, that some will come under eternal condemnation (2 Thess. 1:9; 2:12). So "mercy to all" means that just as God is now pouring out His mercy on the Gentiles as a group, so in the future He will pour out

His mercy on the Jews as a group. He has designed and He controls all of history to display the glory of His mercy to sinners.

The bottom line for contemplating how God has designed and controls all of history to display His faithfulness and mercy is:

4. Stand in awe of the faithful, merciful God.

Thinking about these profound truths moved Paul to burst out in worship (Rom. 11:33-36): "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable 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."

We will look at those verses in more depth next time, but they teach us that this truth of God's sovereignty over salvation history is not for debate, but for worship. It should cause us to stand in awe of God and to thank Him for His faithfulness to His promises and to worship Him for showing us mercy.

Conclusion

I conclude with seven practical applications. Some of these will apply more to some than to others, but as they say, "If the shoe fits, wear it!"

(1) Make sure that you have received God's mercy by repenting of your sins and trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. God has you hearing this message so that as you feel the weight of your sin and guilt, you can turn to Him and know His mercy.

(2) Grow in worship and humility before God as you meditate often on His sovereignty over history and on the mercy that He has shown you. These truths are not just for your brain, but for your heart before God. Humble yourself before the Almighty Sovereign of history.

(3) If you have received God's mercy, be merciful to other sinners who are racially or morally different than you, especially when they have sinned against you. Paul knew that the gospel should result in redeemed Gentile sinners extending mercy to Jewish sinners, and vice versa. Apart from God's mercy to you, you would be just as offensive to other sinners as they are toward you. They need mercy, not judgment.

(4) *Rely on God's faithfulness to His promises no matter how contrary to your current circumstances those promises may seem.* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all died in faith, without receiving the promises (Heb. 11:13). Don't stop trusting when you don't see instant results.

(5) *Since in the inscrutable ways of God the destiny of your children and grandchildren is somehow linked to your faith, make sure that for their sakes you walk with God.* The disobedience of the Jews in the time of Christ has affected 2,000 years of Jewish history! How frightening! And as Paul has said (11:22), if we Gentiles do not continue in God's kindness, we (and our descendants) could be cut off. Your walk with God matters to more than just you!

(6) *Tell others about God's great mercy and faithfulness toward sinners who will call upon Him.* His purpose in shutting us all up in disobedience is that He might show mercy to all. He is "abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for 'whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom. 10:12b-13).

(7) *If you reject Christ, you are an enemy of God.* The Jews were God's enemies because they had rejected the Savior that He had graciously sent. Right now, you're either the object of God's mercy through faith in Christ or you're His enemy, headed toward judgment, because you have rejected Christ. There is no neutral ground. The most loving thing I can say to you is, "Trust in Christ today!"

Application Questions

1. Someone argues, "If God designed and controls history, then He is the author of sin." How would you refute this biblically?
2. Some argue that verse 32 means that God will save everyone. How would you rebut this error (from Scripture)?
3. How can you know whether you're maintaining the biblical balance between God's sovereignty and human responsibility?
4. How can we have a deeper experience of God's mercy?

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