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GOD IS GREAT; YOU ARE NOT GREAT (Part 1)

Romans 11:33-36

By

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Romans Lesson 73

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Romans 11:33-36

Pastor John Piper tells of a time when he felt impressed to preach on God's greatness as revealed in Isaiah 6, the passage where Isaiah saw the Lord on His throne. Normally Piper says that he would have tried to apply the text, but on this Sunday, he simply tried to lift up and display the majesty and glory of God, without a word of application. He did not realize that one of the young families in his church had just discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. They were there that Sunday and heard his message.

Piper says that many advisors to us pastors would have said, "Pastor Piper, can't you see that your people are hurting? Can't you come down out of the heavens and get practical? Don't you realize what kind of people sit in front of you on Sunday?" Some weeks later he learned the story. The husband took him aside after a service and said, "John, these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God's holiness that you gave me the first week in January. It has been the rock we could stand on."

Piper concludes (*The Supremacy of God in Preaching* [Baker], pp. 10-11), "The greatness and glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God."

Paul has been outlining for us how God has sovereignly designed and controlled salvation history. There was a long period of time (from Abraham to Christ) when He permitted the Gentile nations to go their own way, while He revealed Himself to the Jews. But then the Jews rejected their Messiah and God brought a partial hardening on them. In many ways, this hardening even went back to the time of Moses (Deut. 32:5-35), but it was intensified when the nation crucified the sinless Son of God. At that point, while preserving a remnant of saved Jews, God opened the door of His mercy to the Gentiles, who are now coming to salvation in

unprecedented numbers. But in the future, God will keep His covenant promises to the fathers by showing mercy again to the Jews, "so all Israel will be saved."

Paul concludes this discussion (11:32) by marveling, "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all." "All" in the context does not refer to every individual, but to all groups of people. He has shut up all the Gentiles and the Jews to disobedience, so that He can show mercy to both groups.

Verse 32 sums up Paul's line of thought in Romans thus far. All the Gentiles (Romans 1) and the Jews (Romans 2) have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3). That means that the only way of salvation is not through human works, but rather through God's grace and mercy (Romans 4 & 5). Verse 32 also sums up Romans 9-11, which focuses on the problem of why the Jews were rejecting Christ. Paul shows that because of our sin, salvation is only possible if God through His sovereign grace chose to have mercy on us (Romans 9). If we are lost, it is because we have refused to call upon the Lord (Romans 10). Because of His gracious promises to the patriarchs, God is not finished with the Jews (Romans 11). While they are now disobedient to God, they will yet again be shown mercy. This thought leads Paul to break out in this concluding doxology that wraps up the entire discussion from Romans 1 through 11.

The main idea that comes through in our text is the immensity of God and the relative puniness of man. Charles Hodge puts it (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 377), "Few passages, even in the Scriptures, are to be compared with this, in the force with which it presents the idea that God is all, and man is nothing." Isaiah 40, from which Paul cites (v. 34), may compare. In that great chapter, Isaiah says (40:15, 17), "Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales, . . . All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless."

Paul also cites from Job (41:11), where for four chapters God grills Job on where he was when God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in it. God relentlessly hammers home the truth that He alone is great and no man, not even the most righteous man on the face of the earth, is great. At the end, Job answers

(42:2), "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted." He goes on to admit that he had declared things beyond his knowledge and understanding, and so he repents in dust and ashes. It is that same exalting of God and humbling of us that Paul sets forth here. His message is:

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

You may react to that statement by thinking, "That puts me down and damages my self-esteem! I thought that I needed to believe in myself and build my self-esteem." But that idea came into Christian circles through atheistic psychologists like Carl Rogers, not through the Word of God. Besides, that approach puts you on a path that does not lead to personal and emotional wholeness, because it leaves you as the center of your life. It's interesting that Isaiah 40, which extols God's greatness, begins with God saying (40:1), "Comfort, O comfort My people," and ends with the prophet explaining how God gives strength to the weary who wait upon the Lord (40:29-31).

And to poor Job, who was already beaten to a pulp with all his afflictions and his insensitive counselors, God didn't say, "Job, think about what a great man you are! You're really the most righteous man on earth." God didn't play the psychologist to build Job's self-esteem. Rather, He directed Job to think about how great God is, which humbled Job, led him to worship God, and be restored. Since God humbles the proud, but lifts the needy from the ash heap (1 Sam. 2:6-8), being humbled in the presence of the God who alone is great brings great comfort and restoration to your soul. It's intensely practical to magnify the Lord and to minimize your view of yourself. So let's consider this transforming truth:

1. God is far greater than you can ever comprehend.

Romans 11:33: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!"

One of the most important lessons that we all need to learn is, "God is God; I am not God." That sounds obvious, but we challenge it every time we think that God owes us something or that He is not treating us as well as we think we deserve. We act against

it every time we sin. We violate the truth of it every time we grumble about our circumstances. We fly in the face of it every time we get puffed up with pride or look down on others.

We undermine it every time we question God's right to act as the Bible tells us He acted: "It's not fair that He loved Jacob and hated Esau! It's not right that He slaughtered all the firstborn children in Egypt! God didn't even warn the Egyptian parents to put the blood on their doorposts and lintels. It's not right that He commanded Israel to slaughter the Canaanites, including women and children! It's not merciful for Him to strike Uzzah dead for touching the ark! He was only trying to help!" All of those arrogant challenges to God's right to be God imply that the challenger knows more than God knows. And so a very basic lesson is, "God is God; I am not God." If you don't learn that before you stand before Him at the judgment, you will learn it then, but too late!

Paul first exclaims his wonder at the depth of certain qualities or attributes of God and then lays out either four or five of those attributes. I say "four or five" because the Greek text can legitimately be translated in either of two ways and scholars are divided, as the difference between the NASB and the ESV (11:33) reflects. The NASB reads, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" The ESV reads, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" It's difficult to decide between the two. In favor of the NASB, Paul does not normally use "riches" without a qualifying genitive ("of His kindness" [2:4]; "of His glory" [9:23]; "of His grace" [Eph. 1:7]; etc.). It seems unlikely that Paul would put "riches" in parallel with "wisdom and knowledge" if he did not mean "the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God." (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], pp. 632-633, argues for this view.)

On the other hand, Paul may be reflecting back on the riches of God's grace and love in Christ as he has expounded on them thus far in Romans. It has been pointed out that the citations from the Old Testament (in 11:34 & 35) relate to these three qualities in reverse order: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" relates to His knowledge; "Who became His counselor?" relates to His wisdom; and, "Who has first given to Him?" relates to His riches. I'm not dogmatic, but I'm going to look at these verses under five

headings, each of which show that God is greater than we can ever comprehend.

God's incomprehensibility is reflected in the word *depth*. It's not that we cannot know God at all, but rather that we can never get to the bottom of who He is in His greatness. Maybe you've stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon and peered into the bottom and exclaimed, "Oh, the depth!" I just read that some explorers, including James Cameron, the director of "Titanic," are going to dive to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest place on earth. It goes down to almost 36,000 feet (almost 7 miles) below sea level. More people have been to the moon than have gone down to the bottom of this trench, which is described as "the most hostile, most remote environment on the face of the planet" (*Arizona Daily Sun*, 3/19/12). If Cameron's vessel were to leak, the pressure would crush him so fast that he couldn't even cry out.

"Oh, the depth!" Let's try to explore some of the depths of God:

A. God's riches are beyond comprehension.

As I recently pointed out, Paul loved the thought of God's riches: He is (Rom. 10:12b-13) "abounding in riches for all who call on Him, for whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." In Ephesians 1:7-8 Paul says, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us." In Ephesians 2:7, he says "that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." We will never get to the bottom of the depths of the riches of His grace! In Ephesians 3:8 he says, "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." He uses the same word as in Romans 11:33, how "unfathomable are His ways." It means that they are not capable of being tracked.

Are you enjoying the depth of the riches of God's grace toward you in Christ? Do you revel in the fact that God has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3)? Do you marvel that He chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world and that in love He predestined you to adoption as his child through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to

the kind intention of His will, freely bestowing His grace on you in the Beloved (Eph. 1:4-6)? Like Scrooge McDuck in the old Donald Duck cartoon strip, you are swimming in piles and piles of God's riches, lavished on you in Christ. Use those riches daily!

B. God's wisdom is beyond comprehension.

God's wisdom somewhat overlaps with His knowledge. The difference is that knowledge is information and wisdom is the application of that knowledge. So God's wisdom concerns how He does what He does. The Hebrew word for wisdom has the nuance of skill. To acquire wisdom is to obtain the skill to live a beautiful life before God. Proverbs 2:6 says, "For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." God's wisdom is revealed to us in His written Word.

In our text, Paul is especially referring to the wisdom that informs God's purposes and His accomplishment of them (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark International], 2:589). As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, God's wisdom is especially revealed in the cross of Christ, which is foolishness to the so-called "wise" men of this world. He says (1 Cor. 1:24), "But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." If you want to go deeper in God's wisdom, meditate often on the glory of Christ crucified for your sins.

C. God's knowledge is beyond comprehension.

God's knowledge is His omniscience, the comprehensive information that is the basis for His wisdom. God knows all things in the universe exhaustively. He knows what is going on in the chemical reactions of the stars in billions of distant galaxies. He knows what is going on in the cells of your body. He knows your thoughts before you have them and your words before you speak them (Ps. 139:1-4). He knew you when you were being formed in your mother's womb and He knows the exact number of your days (Ps. 139:16). He not only knows all things that will happen, but He also knows all things that would have happened had other contingencies prevailed, and He judges people on that basis (Matt. 11:21-24)! Hebrews 4:13 puts it, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."

God's exhaustive knowledge of us is both frightening and comforting. It's frightening in that you can't hide anything from God. "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23)! When the Lord told Abraham that Sarah would conceive in her old age, Sarah, who was in the tent, laughed in unbelief. The Lord asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? ... Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" But Sarah was afraid and denied it, saying, "I didn't laugh." But the Lord said, "No, but you did laugh" (Gen. 18:13-15). The comforting thing about God's exhaustive knowledge is that even though He knows our weaknesses and sins, He doesn't cast us off, but blesses us with His gracious promises in spite of our weaknesses. But we would live far differently if we always remembered that His knowledge is beyond our comprehension.

D. God's judgments are beyond comprehension.

"How unsearchable are His judgments!" God's judgments are how He executes His righteousness and justice. David reflects the same thought as Paul when he writes (Ps. 36:5-6), "Your loving-kindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens, Your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are like a great deep."

God's judgments in times gone by included wiping out everyone on the face of the earth, except for Noah and his family. Later, at the Tower of Babel, God's judgment confused the languages of the proud men there and scattered them over the face of the earth. From that time until the time of Paul, the Lord judged the Gentiles by permitting the nations to go their own ways (Acts 14:16). In the context of Romans, God's judgments on the Gentiles included giving them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, degrading passions, and a depraved mind (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). His judgments on the Jews meant hardening most of them, giving them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not (Rom. 11:7-8). In the future, God's judgment on this evil world will be to "send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness" (2 Thess. 2:11-12).

E. God's ways are beyond comprehension.

In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord. 'For as

the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Watchman Nee has a wonderful sermon, “Worshiping the Ways of God” (*12 Baskets Full* [Hong Kong Church Book Room], 3 vol.). He defines God’s ways (2:99): “His ways are the manner in which He Himself for His own good pleasure accomplishes what He has willed to do.” This includes God’s choosing Isaac, the son of the promise, but rejecting Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn through Hagar. His way was to choose Jacob the deceiver, but reject Esau, a much nicer man. He chose Judah, who thought that he was having sex with a prostitute, but actually it was his daughter-in-law, to be the ancestor of the Messiah.

As Paul says (1 Cor. 1:27-28), “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.” These are the incomprehensible ways of the Sovereign God!

In light of the greatness of God, Paul goes on to cite Scripture that both supports God’s greatness and puts us in our proper place:

2. You are not great.

I’m out of time and so I’m just going to give these points in outline form in this message and then expand on them next time. Paul asks three rhetorical questions that all expect the answer, “No one.” These questions show that in comparison to God, we are not even close to being great.

A. You are not great in knowledge.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord?” (11:34a). We have just seen that the Lord knows everything about everyone in all times and in every place. We aren’t even on the curve in His class!

B. You are not great in wisdom.

“Or who became His counselor?” (11:34b). God didn’t ask our advice before He formed His plan for the ages. Paul has already said that the mystery of God’s hardening the Jews until the

fullness of the Gentiles comes in is “so that you will not be wise in your own estimation” (11:25).

C. You are not great in riches.

“Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?” (11:35). We owe God everything He owes us nothing. This verse alone kills all attempts to earn salvation by good works. You can’t put God in your favor so that He owes you anything. It’s all of grace. Therefore,

3. 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.” A big view of God and a little view of ourselves leads to genuine humility and to heartfelt worship.

Conclusion

In 1715, Louis XIV of France died. He called himself, “Louis the Great.” His court was the most magnificent in all of Europe. He even planned his funeral to be spectacular. To dramatize his greatness, his body was put in a golden coffin. He had given orders that the cathedral be dimly lit, with only a special candle set above the coffin. Thousands waited in hushed silence. Then Bishop Massilon began to speak. Slowly reaching down, he snuffed out the candle, saying, “Only God is great!”

That’s what Paul is saying here: God is great; you are not great. So humble yourself before Him and worship Him alone!

Application Questions

1. If self-esteem is not biblical, are we supposed to go around dumping on ourselves? Where is the biblical balance?
2. Discuss some practical applications that flow from getting a bigger view of God’s greatness.
3. How does it work on a daily basis to lay hold of God’s deep riches? What does this look like when facing temptation?
4. God’s total knowledge of you is both frightening and comforting. Which aspect is truer for you? Why? Which should be?

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