

# Theology to Doxology

Romans 11:33-36

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This morning we are going to do some theology. In case you didn't know, the study of God is called theology. Sometimes people talk negatively about theology, saying that it is boring, impractical, and unnecessary. Some will tell you that we need to focus on the practical elements of religion, and that theology is not that important. For many, it's associated with dusty old books and boring professors. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul's letters tend to follow a similar pattern. Most focus on theology and proper belief at the beginning, and then move into practice at the end. Paul does this because he understands that how you view the Lord will affect the way you live your faith. The question of who God is and what He is like is of immense importance!

We've spent several months unpacking the theology of Romans chapters 1-11. Today we arrive at the end of that section, and next week we will move into Paul's application of these truths. But we must be sure we have our theology correct, or else we will misunderstand what Paul says in application.

Today, we look at one of my favorite passages of scripture. I know I say that often, but these verses have had a profound effect on my view of the Lord and are what drive me in everything I do. My hope today is that you will see the beauty of the truths Paul expounds in these verses and will find yourself primed to appropriately apply what he says in the verses that follow.

## An Explosion of Praise

The verses we are going to look at today compose what is known as a doxology. If you grew up in the church, you may be familiar with "The Doxology", which is a hymn churches sometimes sing. But the term doxology is actually a broader term that simply means a collection of praise or glory. That is what we see in these verses today.

As I read Romans, I picture Paul's excitement level rising as he speaks. In Romans 8-11, I can hear him arriving at almost a fever pitch, exclaiming how wonderful God's grace and His plans are. Romans 11:33-36 seem to be the climax, where Paul reaches the height of his amazement with the Lord.

Listen to what Paul says here,

<sup>33</sup> Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! <sup>34</sup> For who can know the Lord's thoughts? Who knows enough to give him advice? <sup>35</sup> And who has given him so much that he needs to pay it back? <sup>36</sup> For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen.  
(Romans 11:33-36, NLT)

One of the things that makes me laugh as I read these verses is that Paul has just spent 11 chapters explaining God's character and His plan in a level of depth that none of us can fully grasp. For two-thousand years, people have been wrestling with the truths of what the Apostle Paul has said. Even the Apostle Peter admitted that some of what Paul says is hard to understand! (cf. 2 Peter 3:16) And yet, after Paul has given maybe the deepest and most thorough explanation of God's plans and purposes, he exclaims that no one can even begin to understand His ways! The even more astounding thing is that Paul does not seem upset by this in the slightest; rather, he sees it as a reason to praise and worship the Lord!

Paul begins by praising the fact that God's wisdom and knowledge are so deep and wide that we cannot understand why He chooses to do the things He does. The immediate context of this is that we cannot understand the reasons why or the methods by which God has chosen to work in the people of Israel and how He has chosen whom He will save. This is something that bothers people about these doctrines. Sometimes people have concluded that if God chooses to save people in a way that is not based on what they do (or what He foresees they will do), then that makes His decision arbitrary. But that is not the case at all. God's decision is not arbitrary, it is just beyond our ability to understand. Paul's point is that God has a perfect plan, which He has been executing from before the creation of the world. Nothing God does is arbitrary; it is simply deeper than we can grasp.

This has a broader application than just God's ways regarding salvation. It is true in everything God does. So often, we get upset when we don't understand why God allows certain things to happen. For many, this results in a crisis of faith. They don't understand why God would allow a loved one to die or to get a debilitating disease. They don't understand why they have faced hardship after hardship and feel beaten down. Or they don't understand why evil people seem to prosper, while those who are trying to do what is right struggle. These are not new struggles. Even back in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, we see Solomon struggle with some of these same questions—and Solomon was the wisest man that ever lived!

Paul's point is that no one can ferret out God's plans. They are beyond us. One of the greatest examples of this is the story of Job. Job was a man who sought to live according to the Lord's precepts. He was aware of his own sin and the sins of his family, and he sought to make things right before the Lord whenever he failed (even offering sacrifices for sins he didn't know about). Job tried to deal with everyone uprightly. By all accounts, Job was a good man.

The Lord had given Job great blessings in the way of family, land, cattle, and possessions. Job was a rich man in almost every sense of the word. Satan desired to attack Job, because his premise was that the only reason Job worshiped the Lord was that the Lord gave Job the things he wanted. So Satan was allowed to take all of those things from him. In a single day, Job's children died, his wealth was taken from him,

everything he owned was gone. Job remained faithful. So Satan also took away his health, covering Job with painful sores. And yet, Job remained faithful.

Job had some friends who came to comfort him. They started off good, simply mourning with him. But then they started speaking. Even their speeches were not terrible at first, but then they began to try to explain why God was doing what He was doing, and they were dead wrong. They were trying to explain the mind of the Lord, but they were way off base. Eventually, even Job began to demand answers from the Lord. And the Lord eventually did answer—but not in the way Job (or we) might have expected. Listen to God's response to Job.

Then the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind: <sup>2</sup>“Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? <sup>3</sup> Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them. <sup>4</sup>“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. <sup>5</sup> Who determined its dimensions and stretched out the surveying line? <sup>6</sup> What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone <sup>7</sup> as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 38:1-7, NLT)

This goes on for four chapters! I have to admit, I find this passage one of the scariest in all of scripture. The Lord demands answers from Job and his friends, since they all seemed to know so much. God begins asking Job questions to drive home one very important point—you know so much less than you think!

God drives home the point that Job cannot possibly understand what He is doing. Job wanted answers from God. God's response was not to explain to Job what or why He was doing the things He was, but rather to point Job to His character. God understood that Job didn't need to understand what God was doing (and in truth, he couldn't fully), what Job needed to understand was who God was (and is). God never explained to Job the reasons why He did what He did. He simply drove home the difference between Job's character and the Lord's. And that led to Job's response four chapters later.

Then Job replied to the Lord: <sup>2</sup>“I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you. <sup>3</sup> You asked, ‘Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?’ It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about, things far too wonderful for me. <sup>4</sup> You said, ‘Listen and I will speak! I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.’ <sup>5</sup> I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. <sup>6</sup> I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.” (Job 42:1-6, NLT)

A proper view of the Lord solves all our problems. It doesn't take away our hardships, but it does remind us that God is in control and knows what He is doing. Our challenge is not to try to figure out the Lord and what He is doing (although we always want to understand as much as possible), but to recognize that we will never fully grasp what the Lord is doing. And rather than that being a cause for lament, it ought to be a reason for praise.

## God's Debt to Us

That leads to Paul's second rhetorical question, which is to ask who has given something to God so that God must repay him? Again, the implicit answer is NO ONE! This seems like a simple truth, and yet, it is still one we often struggle to grasp.

Have you ever found yourself saying something like this? Why did God allow this hardship to happen to me? I go to church, I tithe regularly, I serve on boards and committees, I volunteer in the children's ministry, and I try to live a Christian life!

Maybe those haven't been your exact words, but most of us have asked questions like this at some point in our lives. Can I humbly point something out? The essence of this argument is to say that God owes us good things because we have done a bunch of good things. The essence of the argument is that God is in debt to us because of how much we have done for Him, so He is obligated to make our lives easy.

When you state the argument that way, you can begin to understand the foolishness of it. And yet, we do tend to live with this kind of mentality. We feel that by living according to God's dictates, we are somehow earning His favor, and ensuring a life of ease.

Paul reminds us that God owes no one anything. Some have twisted this to say that if you give to God, He will give you back even more. If you give God one dollar, He'll return to you ten. That is a ludicrous notion. God is not obligated to anyone. These people argue that God will do this because He will not remain indebted to anyone. This shows a complete misunderstanding of what Paul is saying! Paul is saying that no amount of giving to God can put Him in our debt! He *cannot* be put in our debt, as we owe everything to Him already.

Again, a proper theology leads to a proper understanding of God, which leads to a proper response to Him as well.

## For His Glory

Paul's concluding statement in this section is the one that has profoundly affected my view of the world and the Lord. Listen to what Paul says in verse 36,

<sup>36</sup> For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen. (Romans 11:36, NLT)

There are three important statements in this short verse. We need to grasp each of them if we want to see the wonder of these truths.

**First, everything comes from God.** This is precisely the reason that no one can put God in their debt. Anything we might give to God is something that is already His! I once heard a joke about a scientist who claimed that God creating life was no big deal, as he could do the same thing with the chemicals in his lab. He threw down a gauntlet to the Lord and challenged Him. The Lord agreed to the challenge and challenged the scientist to create life, just as He had done. The scientist began to leave, and the Lord

asked him where he was going. The scientist replied that he needed to go to his lab and get his chemicals. The Lord's response was, "Those are mine—make your own!"

The point is simple. Everything we see was created by God. He created *ex nihilo* or, out of nothing. We cannot even conceive of this. Which should lead us to praise.

**Second, everything continues to exist because of God.** The Lord did not create the world and then take His hands off. He continues to be active in our world. He continues to direct the events of history. He will ultimately ensure that all things work together for good, and that His good purposes are fulfilled. This means that everything that happens is ultimately because of God's continued intervention. We are utterly dependent upon Him, whether we choose to acknowledge that fact or not.

**Third, everything is intended for His glory.** Until we grasp the other truths of this passage, we cannot grasp this truth. But once we do, it changes everything! The great purpose of the entirety of creation, of the past, present, and future, and of you and me is singular—to glorify God.

Now that's a kind of churchy statement, so I want to unpack it just a bit. To glorify God simply means to honor Him as He deserves. So everything we see ultimately serves a singular purpose—to point us to His greatness.

Louie Giglio, a Christian pastor and songwriter, gave a talk once that showed many of the great sights we have seen in our universe. He showed pictures from the Hubble space telescope, and several other views of deep space. He then addressed a question someone had once asked him. "If the universe is intended as a home for us, then isn't it massively oversized?" Giglio admitted that this was true. But he said, maybe we should ask a different question. His statement was this: "Maybe the universe is not intended as a home for us, but a canvas to showcase the glory of God." If that's the case, then an infinite universe seems like just the right thing to do it.

The universe is not primarily about you and me. It is about testifying to the greatness of our God!

The same is true with everything Paul has written so far in Romans. God had a plan, before He even created the world, that He would create human beings and rescue them from their inevitable sin. He chose some whom He would save in advance, while choosing to allow others to face the just punishment of their rebellion. There is part of us that cannot understand this fully. Something about this just doesn't sit right with us. And that's because we think the story is about us. It's not. Everything, even our salvation is intended to magnify God's character, and lead us to praise Him as He deserves.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is a series of questions and answers designed to be taught to children to teach them Christian doctrine begins with this question:

**Q:** What is the chief end of man? **A:** Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

This answers of the great mysteries of our day. People often ask, what is the purpose of life? It's not nearly as complicated as people want to make it. Our purpose is to glorify God.

This is Paul's assertion in these verses. Before Paul moves into the "so what?" portion of Romans, telling us how we should live, he wants us to get this truth firmly in our heads. Our purpose is to bring glory to God. Everything is designed for this end. The sooner we grasp this, the better we'll be able to fulfill our purpose.

## Conclusion

We've had a healthy dose of theology today. But as I said at the beginning, theology ought to lead us to a place of praise of our God. The better we understand Him, the more we are led to praise Him. With these truths in mind, let me draw some applications.

**First, we can find rest in God.** So many of us are churning, wondering what will happen next and how things are going to work out. As we look at God's character, we should find rest as we remember that God knows what's happening. He is directing the events of history toward His purpose. We should do what we can with the information we have, and then simply rest in the knowledge that God knows what we don't.

**Second, we should have a different perspective about life.** Today we've answered the question of what the purpose of our lives is. Our purpose is to honor God in everything we do, everything we say, the way we spend our time and our resources. If we can keep this in mind, it makes a lot of what we do much clearer. Our purpose is not to draw attention to ourselves or to achieve "success" in the eyes of the world or our peers. We are successful when we live our lives to bring glory to our Lord.

**Finally, we should spend time meditating on His greatness.** Good theology is the remedy to a lot of problems. So often, we get into trouble because we lose sight of God. That's what happened to Peter when he was walking on the water, it's what happened to Job when his world seemed to fall apart, and it's what happens to us when we get distracted by the things of this world. Take some time to remind yourself of who this God is that we serve. Look at the majesty of creation and realize He created it with a word! Look at history and see God's promises being played out over the course of thousands of years. Look at your own life and see the wonder of how God has brought you to a place of faith and trust in Him. I believe that the greater our view of God becomes, the smaller our view of everything else becomes as well. When we reflect on the nature and character of God, there is really only one response: praise!

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