

# The Inestimable Nature of God

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## Romans 11:33-36

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For 11 incredible chapters now Paul has been demonstrating the wisdom of God's redemptive plan. From chapter one where Paul declared, "[The gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek", to where we stand this morning at the close of chapter 11, Paul has systematically and comprehensively recounted the infinite wisdom of God in saving guilty sinners. In this letter Paul has dealt with the issues of sin and rebellion in the human heart; He has dealt with the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone; He has dealt with the believers union with Christ and the blessings of no condemnation or separation; He has dealt with the Spirit's power in sanctification; and he completed his string of arguments with the glorious truth that God will make good on every single one of His promises. Not only are Gentiles being saved, but God's gracious, merciful, redeeming love will ultimately find its fulfillment in the salvation of Israel as a nation.

As Paul considers the redemptive plan of God, he stands overwhelmed by and in awe of God's character. [His] argument concerning God's elective grace and goodness has carried him to the heights and now he pauses on the edge of the precipice as he contemplates God's [riches] and wisdom and knowledge...<sup>1</sup> He slips almost seamlessly from theology into a song of doxology. Before Paul goes on the practical implications of the gospel in chapters 12-16, he falls down before God and worships. Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning:

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:33–36*

### **1. GOD'S RICHES ARE WITHOUT END. (v. 33a)**

*Oh, the depth of the riches...*

"Oh, the depth..." Paul's uses the Greek word (*bathos* / deep) in verse 33. This word has the idea of deep waters. Immediately in Paul's doxology we are reminded that we are dealing with a God who is entirely other than us. God is vast, inexhaustible, incalculable, inestimable, and

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<sup>1</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Accordance electronic ed. Altamonte Springs: OakTree

unfathomable. In God there is an infinite profundity. He is by nature incomprehensible to our finite minds. John Wesley once said, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend God. We should recognize that not only are our minds incapable of exhaustively knowing and understanding God, but our language is incapable of adequately describing Him. The fact that God is incomprehensible doesn’t mean that we can’t know anything about God. God has revealed Himself in part both in His Word and in the person and work of His Son. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane just hours before His crucifixion, “Now this is eternal life, that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Spurgeon once said, “The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.”<sup>2</sup> God condescends Himself to us and reveals Himself to us, but we are gravely mistaken if we ever think that we have God figured out. When we consider the nature and character of God we must humbly realize that we are in deep waters.

I want to put depth into a little perspective here for you. The Mariana Trench in the Western Pacific Ocean is the deepest recess on the face of the planet. At its “deepest-known” point it reaches a depth of 36,069 feet below sea level – a location named the Challenger Deep. To put that in context, if you were to submerge Mt. Everest, whose peak towers 29,029 feet above sea level, into the Challenger Deep, it would be covered by over 7,000 feet (almost a mile and a half) of water. The floor of the Mariana Trench has only been reached four times and only twice by submersible carrying a human. It’s vastly unexplored because of the difficulty and danger to reach its depths. But these depths don’t compare to God’s depths.

In Job 11:7 Job asks, “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?” Likewise, the Psalmist in Psalm 92:5 writes, “How great are your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep.” When we consider the nature and character of God we must understand that we are swimming in an infinitely deep ocean. Paul wants to resize our view of God. He wants us to know that God’s riches, God’s wisdom, and God’s knowledge have a depth that are beyond our understanding. Consider God’s riches.

Paul speaks of the riches of God’s kindness and forbearance and patience (Romans 2:4), the riches of God’s glory (Romans 9:23), the riches of God on all who call on him (Romans 10:12), the riches of God’s glorious inheritance (Ephesians 1:18), the riches of God’s mercy (Ephesians 2:4), the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:7), the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8). God’s riches are deep. Listen to how Paul

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Immutability of God*. Sermon preached on January 7th, 1855.

describes the riches of Christ's mercy in 2 Corinthians 8:9. He says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." Salvation is a gift from God's riches and it immensely enriches those to whom it is given.<sup>3</sup> Albert Barnes says:

*The pardon of sin; the atonement; the hope of heaven; the peace of the gospel; all bestowed on the sinful, the poor, the wretched, and the dying, all [reveal] the great mercy and rich grace of God. It is beyond the power of language to express; all that the Christian can do, is to follow the example of [Paul], and sit down in profound admiration of the rich grace of God.*<sup>4</sup>

Remember Paul's words in Ephesians 2... "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... But God, being *rich in mercy*, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" Ephesians 2:1–5. God's riches are without end!

## **2. GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING. (v. 33b)**

*And the wisdom and Knowledge of God!*

I want us to first consider the Knowledge of God. Knowledge is the awareness of fact or truth. God not only knows all things, but he knows all things exhaustively. He has never learned anything. He has perfect knowledge of everything past, present and future. No new idea has ever come to him. He has never discovered anything. No one has ever enlightened Him. He is perfectly acquainted with every detail in the life of every being in heaven, on earth, and in hell. His knowledge is infinitely deep. We could never plumb the depths of all He knows. He told Job that He laid the foundations of the earth (Job 38:4). He created the stars and brings them out like an army calling them all by name (Isaiah 40:26 NLT). He tells the ocean you can come this far and no farther (Job 38:11). To get a little more personal, God said that he formed your inmost parts and knit you together in your mother's womb (Psalm 139:13). Jesus told his disciples that the hairs on your head are numbered (Matthew 10:30). A.W. Tozer has an excellent treatment of the knowledge of God in his book *the Knowledge of the Holy*:

*Could God at any time or in any manner receive into His mind knowledge what He did not possess and had not possessed from all eternity, He would be imperfect and less than Himself. To think of a God who must sit at the feet of a teacher, even though that teacher be an archangel or a seraph is to think of someone other than the Most High God, maker of*

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<sup>3</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 310.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*. (Accordance electronic ed. Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2006), n.p.

*heaven and earth... God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and on earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven and hell... Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor (except when drawing men out for their own good) does He seek information or ask any questions.<sup>5</sup>*

Three responses this should elicit from us.

- A. Humility - Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Psalm 139:6
- B. Comfort
- C. Encouragement

How does the knowledge of God apply to an unbeliever? If you are not yet a believer, let me remind you that that you have sinned and that you have sinned in the face of God, You have sinned knowingly, willfully, brazenly, and repeatedly.<sup>6</sup> The writer of Hebrews gives us some sobering application of God's knowledge for any unbeliever when he says, "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" Hebrews 4:13. If God knows everything, and He does, then He knows all your sin.

How do you suppose you will escape this knowledge? How do you suppose you will evade His righteous requirements? Not one sin is forgotten, not one transgression is swept under the rug, and not one rebel moment goes unnoticed. Psalm 130:3 says, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins who could stand? No one will be able to stand before God on the basis of his own merit. If we are to stand, we must stand on the merit of Jesus Christ's perfect record. If you don't know Christ, if you are not hidden in Him, I beg you to cast yourself upon His mercy. Psalm 130:4 follows verse 3 and says, "But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared." Bring all of your sin to Christ and turn to Him alone for forgiveness.

God not only has a depth of knowledge, but he also has a depth of wisdom. If knowledge is the awareness of facts, then wisdom is the application of fact or truth. Not only does God "know", but he knows what do with what He knows! He has infinite knowledge, but He knows how to use that knowledge to the best end – namely for His glory. It's a demonstration of God's wisdom that salvation is by grace and not a result of human striving and effort. If we could work for and

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<sup>5</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans Volume 3: God and History*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 1423-24

earn our salvation we would get the glory. Grace is a demonstration of the wisdom of God for the glory of God. God's temporary hardening of Israel so that the Gentiles might hear and respond to the gospel is God's wisdom. God using the Gentiles to incite jealousy in the hearts of Israel so that they might turn to Christ and receive Him as their messiah is a demonstration of His wisdom. God's future plans to pour out His grace and save disbelieving Israel as a nation is a demonstration of His wisdom. From creation to consummation God's redemptive plan is infinitely wise.

The wisdom of God is ultimately Jesus Christ Himself, crucified and risen and reigning. I want to show this to you. Turn briefly to 1 Corinthians 1:18-24 and listen to what Paul says about the wisdom of God. He says:

*For the word (message) of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

### **3. GOD MAKES PLANS THAT WE CANNOT UNDERSTAND. (v.33c)**

*How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!*

Paul says, "How unsearchable are His judgments." God's judgments have to do with His decisions, plans, and purposes. Remember that Paul has God's redemptive plan in view. Matthew Henry helpfully says:

*The apostle speaks [of God's unsearchable judgments] especially with reference to the casting off of the Jews and the entertainment of the Gentiles, with a purpose to take in the Jews again in due time; these were strange proceedings, the choosing of some, the refusing of others, and neither according to the probabilities of human conjecture. These are methods [that are unsearchable], concerning which we must say, O the depth!*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)* (Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), n.p.

Job reminds us, “[God] does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number” Job 5:9.

Secondly, Paul says, “How inscrutable (untraceable) are His ways.” God’s ways have to do with His dealings – How His judgments work out. God tells us some things about His ways. He says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” Isaiah 55:8–9. I like the NIV translation here...“His paths beyond tracing out”. The Greek word inscrutable or unfathomable actually means “untraceable”. This word comes to us from a hunting metaphor where a hunter tracks an animal but somewhere in his pursuit he loses its tracks. If we, created beings, try to pry into the untraceable mind of God it won’t be long before we lose His tracks.

The Psalmist in Psalm 77:19 illustrates this perfectly when he says, “Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen.” Have you ever tried to follow footprints in the sea? The Psalmist says that trying to figure out the unfathomable ways of God is like trying to follow footprints in the sea. It’s impossible - We are left to trust His ways by faith!

#### **4. THREE THINGS NO MAN CAN DO. (v. 34-35)**

*For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”*

##### **A. No one can understand the mind of God. (v. 34a)**

Paul asks, “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” Any takers? This is a rhetorical question and the answer is emphatically implied – no one! No creature can plumb the depths of God’s mind. No creature can discern the thoughts of God. There is only one person who can search the mind of God and that is the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 2:10-11 Paul says, “The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” God knows the mind of all His creatures but His creatures do not know His mind with the exception of what He has revealed in His Word and we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit to understand what is revealed.

##### **B. No one can give God counsel. (v. 34b)**

Paul asks, “Who has been His counselor?” Who stands at God’s side giving him advice? To whom does God consult? Who exchanges ideas with God? No one. The wisest man couldn’t offer a word of counsel to God. Paul is quoting Isaiah 40:13-14 when he says, “Who has

measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?"

C. No one can put God in a position of debt. (v. 35)

Paul asks, "Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?" To whom is God obligated? Who holds God under the control of their thumb? Who can demand that God owes him something?

a. God doesn't owe anyone anything.

In Job 41:11 God says, "Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine." We owe God an unpayable debt. So we ask, why is God going to fulfill his promise to Israel? It's not because they earned it. It's because of God's character!

b. God in His mercy gives man what he doesn't deserve.

For just as you (Gentiles) were at one time disobedient to God but now have received **mercy** because of their (Israel's) disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the **mercy** shown to you they also may now receive **mercy**. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have **mercy** on all. Romans 11:30–32

**5. THE ONLY APPROPRIATE RESPONSE IS TO GIVE GOD GLORY. (v. 36)**

*For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

A. God is the source of all things.

*For from Him*

This answers the "where" question. What is the origin of all things?

B. God is the sustainer of all things.

*And through Him*

This answers the "how" question. How does God do all that He does?

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. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Colossians 1:16–17

C. God is the goal of all things.

*And to Him are all things*

This answers the “why” question. Why does God do all that He does?

D. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

David declares in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” But more than these planetary entities, you were made to praise and glorify God forever. We want to glorify God by thinking rightly of Him. We want to glorify God by being submissive to Him. We want to glorify God by reflecting Him as an image bearer. Paul said, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” 1 Corinthians 10:31. David in Psalm 29:2 said, “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.” He is the only person that is worthy of your praise. John, in Revelation 4:11 wrote, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

Your salvation, if you know Christ, is not primarily for or about you. It is for and about God’s glory. God does everything He does for the ultimate purpose of setting his character on display. He saved you that He might demonstrate His mercy and His grace to an undeserving sinner so that he would receive all the glory, all of the honor, and all of the praise that is due His great name. When we contemplate the nature and character of God the only proper response is worshipful adoration. Theology should never be separated from doxology!

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. 1 Timothy 1:17