

Doxology

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 15, 2022.

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

If there is a pinnacle to Paul’s epistle to the Romans, perhaps this is it. Surely this is the exclamation point on what has been revealed up to this point. Considering just the previous several chapters, who can hear of the doctrine of predestination and not praise God for his sovereign grace? Who can read of the gift of the gospel and the necessity of evangelism and not rejoice that God commissioned and mobilized his church into all the world? Who can learn of God’s kindness to Gentiles like you and me and not respond with humble gratitude that God grafted us in?

If you don’t sense the magnitude of the moment in these verses, you haven’t been paying attention. It is as if the significance of everything Paul has written up to this point has welled up within him ready to burst forth in doxological worship! And so he leads us in hymn-like praise, teaching us not only about God but leading us to worship him. As we consider the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God, what do we find? His judgments are unsearchable, his ways inscrutable: “For who has known...or who has been...?” “Or who has given...?”

It is as if, Paul leads us, like a congregational choir, singing in the harmony of the Holy Spirit, three verses to the glory of God. We sing first of his wisdom, three exclamations of God’s sovereign plan. We sing second of his ways, three rhetorical questions that humble yet lead us to worship. We sing third of the wonder of God, three prepositional phrases telling of his supreme sovereignty. It is a hymn that every Christian should know, a doxology we all must sing with reverence and awe.

Verse 1: The Work of God

The Greek particle translated “Oh” is an exclamation, an expression of humility and awe. Paul is neither flippant nor familiar in his doxological response to the revelation of God. In an age where our approach to God is more cavalier (if not outright condescending), Paul’s expression is the equivalent of the Apostle John’s encounter with the resurrected and ascended Son of God:

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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“When I saw him,” John writes, “I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17). If Paul is our choir director, he is leading us prostrate before the Lord.

What flows from this exclamation is a declaration of who God is, as revealed in what he has done. And this, Paul declares, is unfathomable, leading us to consider, even meditate upon, the inexhaustible magnitude, the “depth,” of God’s riches, wisdom, and knowledge, attributes of God, telling of his sovereign work in *our* salvation. How foreign this is in our land of entertainment-driven consumerism, where our view of God is dictated by our desires, and so-called worship is yet another distracting amusement. A.W. Tozer clarifyingly observes,

The church has surrounded her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge... With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. ... The words, “Be still, and know that I am God,” mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshiper...²

If this was the case in Tozer’s day, certainly it is today, but there is but one remedy to this spiritual malady: to behold with Paul a depth that has no bottom, a height that has no summit, a subject inexhaustible, things into which angels long to look (1 Pet. 1:12). “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!”

As materialists, we hear the word “riches” and likely think of worldly wealth. It is not hard to understand how a prosperity gospel has deluded so many in our day. But Jesus confronts this error with one simple question: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). Faced with the stark reality of eternity, you would give everything for heaven, if only you could buy it. But God does not bargain with dust but bestows by grace, showing “the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness” (Eph. 2:7) to sinners like you and me. How can we not wonder?

How deep the Father’s love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.³

But it is not only the riches of God that Paul leads us to consider but his wisdom too. J.I. Packer says, “Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fullness only in God. He alone is naturally and entirely and invariably wise.”⁴ And while we see God’s wisdom on display in obvious ways, such as creation,

² A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *God and History: Romans 9-11* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 3:1411.

³ Stuart Townend, “How Deep the Father’s Love, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.stuarttownend.co.uk/song/how-deep-the-fathers-love-for-us/>.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 80-81.

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Paul has in mind our salvation. As God reveals his wisdom in our justification, sanctification, and ultimately our glorification, Paul could confidently say, “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” (1 Cor. 1:21-24). Oh, the depth of God’s wisdom, indeed!

For, who knows us better than God? While we know things, and our knowledge can grow, our knowledge is limited and imperfect. God’s knowledge is inexhaustible and perfect. Of God’s knowledge, Arthur Pink writes, “God is omniscient. He knows everything; everything possible, everything actual; all events, all creatures, of the past, the present, and the future. He is perfectly acquainted with every detail in the life of every being in heaven, in earth, and in hell. ... Nothing escapes his notice, nothing can be hidden from him, nothing is forgotten by him. ... He never errs, never changes, never overlooks anything.”⁵ And in this perfect knowledge of God, “those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30).

What God does with his riches in his wisdom and according to his knowledge is his sovereign privilege. And yet, there are some who are frustrated that God sovereignly elected some unto salvation in eternity past while passing over others. Some even disdain and reject the doctrine of predestination. Some are frustrated by their limited contribution, arguing for justification by faith today and works tomorrow. Some would rather work for the wages of sin and die than receive the gift of eternal life by faith. But what God does and how God does it does not warrant nor welcome our dispute. As Matthew Henry remarks, “The judgments of his hands, and the ways of his providence, are dark and mysterious, which therefore we must not pry into, but silently adore.”⁶ And so we do, one verse at a time.

Verse 2: The Ways of God

Proceeding from his three exclamations of God’s riches, wisdom, and knowledge, Paul now asks three rhetorical questions, likely complementing the previous exclamations in reverse order. Quoting from Isaiah, Paul asks, “For who has known the mind of the Lord” (Who knows God’s mind)? It is a question of knowledge: Is there anyone that knows what God knows? It is not a searching question but telling. Are you listening?

As his ways are inscrutable, it is God who will ask the questions, as he did poor Job, concluding, “Shall a fault finder contend with the Almighty?” (Job 40:2). Who knows God’s mind? Not Job, not you, not me. No, we stand with Job, confessing, “I have uttered what I did not understand,

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead*, quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *God and History: Romans 9-11* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 3:1419.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 1783.

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things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ...therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3,6). Who knows God’s mind? No one born of Adam.

Like the first, Paul’s second question is also from Isaiah: “who has been [the Lord’s] counselor” (who counsels God)? It is a question of wisdom: Is there anyone wise enough to counsel God? He who is perfect wisdom need not be counseled. Only the fool thinks he has something to offer God. So, take note lest you be wise in your own eyes: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). Who counsels God? No one born of Adam.

The third question Paul asks is from Job, “who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid” (or, who out gives God)? It is a question of riches, but not one of what God owns but what he gives. And if God owns it all, and he graciously gives, then whatever we give to him is what he had given to us. We really aren’t givers but stewards, entrusted with the King’s riches.

“We give thee but thine own,
Whate’er the gift may be:
All that we have is thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from thee.”⁷

But Paul’s question goes farther than God’s wealth and gifts, it also reminds us that we cannot obligate God with our gifts.

Consider the great riches of your salvation. What have you given to God to secure your eternal election? The question is absurd! It was God who chose you in Christ “before the foundation of the world.” And in Christ, you “have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:4,11). No, nothing you can do obligates God, and thank God you can’t out give him.

Or, what have you given to God to be justified as righteous before him? The question is absurd! It is only “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Or, what have you given to God to be sanctified by his Spirit? You may think of your participation as your contribution, but can you be sanctified apart from the gift of the Holy Spirit? It is impossible! It is the Holy Spirit who “helps us in our weakness” (Rom. 8:26), and it is by the Holy Spirit that we are born again, and it is through the Holy Spirit that we are conformed to Christ (Rom. 8:29).

So, “who has known the mind of the Lord”? No one. “who has been his counselor?” No one. “who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” No one. That is, no one but Jesus Christ, not a son of Adam but a new Adam, who is for us perfect knowledge, wisdom, and riches, and “in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9 KJV). When we consider the inexhaustible riches, the unfathomable wisdom, and inexhaustible knowledge of God, we are

⁷ “We Give Thee But Thine Own,” *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 432.

humbled to the dirt, but God “knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14) and points us to Christ our Savior. For, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the answer.

Verse 3: The Wonder of God

And so, we come to the conclusion, a third and final verse, if you will, where we read three short-yet-powerful phrases telling us of three aspects of God’s sovereignty: “from him” tells of his sovereign will as the Source of all things; “through him” tells of his sovereign activity as the Sustainer of all things; and, “to him” tells of his sovereign glory as the Goal of all things. They are three succinct phrases easily spoken but never forgotten. For, it is the Lord “who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11), “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17), and he is worthy “to receive glory and honor and power, for [he] created all things, and by [his] will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

And because all things are from him, through him, and to him, the very purpose of our existence, the purpose of our salvation, the purpose of our eternity is to praise him. And so we shall, for “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”⁸ This is our purpose; this is our privilege; this is our joy. Throughout eternity, let God’s people sing, “To him be glory forever. Amen.”

⁸ “The Shorter Catechism” Question 1, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 355.