

How great is the Lord, and how greatly to be praised! by Rev. Tom Aicken

Scripture Reading: Romans 11:33-36

We are looking in this article at Romans 11, the last part, but I want to begin with chapter 9. The theme of Romans 9 is the sovereignty of God, and I want to focus particularly on the fact that He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. We may wonder about that, but there is no unrighteousness with God in His doing so. We human beings started out as mere dust, remember, so let us not forget our humble beginning. Indeed, it is a well-established and widely recognized principle that the potter has power over the clay to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour.

“Oh, yes,” one may say, “but did God not make a covenant with Israel, a covenant to save His people, and should we not hold Him to His Word to save all whom He so promised? Surely, this covenant promise requires all Israel to be saved.” That is true, but they are not all Israel who are of Israel (as we see in v.6), whereas believing Gentiles are included in the number of the true Israel (as we see in vv.22-24, and again in Gal. 3:26-29). This is the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), you see, not the nation of Israel, but His covenant community, the Church. We will come back to this in chapter 11 and see how all Israel (the Church) will indeed be saved.

What we learn here in Romans 9, though, is that sinners are not saved by anything in themselves, whether by ethnic advantage (being Jewish), by making a decision for Christ (as if left to themselves in their sinful state they ever would), or by doing anything at all to gain the approval of God (as if by some hidden power of their own they even could). It is purely by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ that sinners are saved, i.e. God working in them, planting faith in their hearts in order for them to will and to do His good pleasure – this is how sinners flee to Christ for refuge, this is how they are constrained to come running to Him – and so it is to His praise and everlasting glory alone that their redemption is secured. Here is the sovereignty of God exposed for all to see. This is the explanation of how all whom the Father gives to His Son will come to Him (John 6:37).

The theme of chapter 10 is the responsibility of man, the fact that every man is accountable for everything he does, says, thinks and desires. Many are shocked to

learn this. How can God be sovereign, they wonder, if every man is still responsible for his own actions, and how can any man be truly responsible for what he does, in turn, if God is sovereign over everything that happens? They see these as two incompatible principles, a blatant contradiction. Whether we understand it or not, however, the Bible clearly teaches these two doctrines, the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, and it is instructive that they should appear in these two chapters, one after the other. If we ignore or underestimate either one, we will fail to grasp the important lessons we are taught in these chapters.

The two great lessons of Romans 10 are: (1) that the gospel call is sincerely offered to all people indiscriminately, Jews and Gentiles alike, and that none of all who turn to Christ will ever be turned away (vv.12,13; see Ezek. 18:23); and (2) that if people reject the call, or simply ignore it (which is to reject it), they have no one to blame but their own sinful and God-denying nature for the miserable outcome they thereby bring upon themselves (vv.16-21).

Now we come to chapter 11. The theme of Romans 11 is that there has only ever been one Church, one assembly of saints called out to serve and worship the Lord our God. As there is an Old Testament and a New Testament, two administrations of the one covenant of grace, so there was a predominantly Jewish church (souls mostly drawn from the nation of Israel) under the Old Testament and now a predominantly Gentile church in this New Testament age, but they are one and the same olive tree the Lord is cultivating (as we find in vv.16-24), which tree, as I say, is the true Israel of God. There is some grafting and pruning of this tree alright, and it is by the Lord's own appointed means that it happens, but He is the One cultivating the tree, giving it life, making it fruitful and preserving it. He is the One who calls His people in the first place, passing over none of those whom He had chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world, and He is the One who will also maintain and protect them to the end, all His elect, each and every one without exception. And so, you see how it is that all Israel is to be saved (v. 26).

This brings us, finally, to the passage now before us, Romans 11:33-36. Here is a doxology, a doxology which is not only an ascription of praise to God, but a revelation of some of His glorious attributes. This doxology has been building in the mind and heart of the apostle since he first began to write of these things, and

now it explodes upon the page with a joy that can no longer be contained. These are things that we could never look into on our own, beloved, such deep and wonderful things of God, yet here they are exposed to the view of all who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose. Let us examine them therefore and weigh them very carefully.

V.33, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” Paul is here moved by the all-comprehending knowledge that God has, that perfect knowledge which surveyed all the subjects of His work, all the necessities and circumstances of their being, all the means required for the accomplishment of the divine purpose, and all the results of those means from beginning to end. God knows everything, in other words, He knows it all at the same time, He sees it all clearly before Him, and He never needs to be informed or reminded of anything. Men are easily impressed by the things that they themselves have made, and they want to show them off in order to get the adulation of others, yet with hardness of heart and blind deception they fail to be impressed by the God who has made them, who knows all about them, who declares the end from the beginning and from ancient times the things that are not yet done!

Besides the knowledge of God, notice, the apostle is also moved by the wisdom of God. Now knowledge and wisdom have a great deal in common, to be sure, yet they are not the same. Knowledge is knowing the facts, whereas wisdom is discerning the proper order and use of those facts. God has perfect knowledge, but He also has infinite wisdom, wisdom in selecting and adapting the best means to the object in view – wisdom in ordering the whole scheme of creation, of providence and redemption – such wisdom that the glory of God and the good of His people are so wonderfully and unfailingly promoted. Take careful note, believer, of this One whose ways are higher than our ways and whose thoughts are infinitely higher as well!

In our text we read of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, and that word “riches” refers to their quality. We also read of the depth both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, and that word “depth” makes reference to their quantity. So, both quality and quantity are here set before us. What is not indicated, of course, and what our feeble minds cannot begin to comprehend, is just *how rich* are the riches and *how deep* is the depth of them! Like God’s love in

Ephesians 3, we may stand in the midst of it looking every which way, seeing the width and length and depth and height of what God knows and discerns, yet, while it is so vast that it takes our breath away, it is precisely because it is so vast, so endless, that it boggles the mind and we cannot begin to measure it.

Paul continues, “How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” The word “judgments” in its most restricted and proper sense means judicial decisions; these are God’s decrees concerning men. And these, we are told, are “unsearchable” – that is, they are incapable of being investigated as to their reasons. For instance, God has decreed that some men are to be saved, while others He has appointed to go their own way (as Peter tells us, 1 Pet. 2:8). What that means, to go their own way, is that He leaves them in their sin (Rom. 1:24-32). That is what they have chosen, after all, and, since He will not strive with men forever (as He tells us in Gen. 6:3), that is the way He lets them go. He gives them over to death and eternal condemnation. This is a judgment that God has made concerning them.

Why has He so decreed when we know that He might have saved them as He has others? We do not know. Even more amazingly, however, why has He decreed that other hell-deserving sinners should be saved? Again, we do not know. All He tells us is that it is “according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:5; see also Deut. 7:6-8). What we know of God’s judgments, as limited as our knowledge is, we know because He has told us; the rest, what we have not been told, belongs to His secret counsel and is consequently beyond our powers to investigate (Deut. 29:29).

The word “ways” is not nearly as restricted in meaning as the word “judgments”. The ways of the Lord speak not of His decrees but of His works and observable behaviour. Psalm 145 says, “The Lord is righteous in all His ways.” It would not be correct to say that His ways are unsearchable – we can look into them to some degree – but they are past finding out, which means that we cannot know what God is going to do next. The future is hidden to us. There is not a mathematical formula, not a straight line of reason, nor a series of logical deductions, by which any of us can foresee the future. Quite frankly, it is not our business to know what God is going to do next (Acts 1:7). We can only see what He *has* done, and, as we look at each fulfillment of prophecy in particular, we are constrained to stand

amazed. Oh, that we might continue looking, and that we might do so with even greater wonder and adoration than we ever did before!

V.34, “For who has known the mind of the Lord?” This brings us back to the knowledge of God. Who, at any time, has known all that the Lord knows? “Or who has become His counsellor?” This is an echo of what we read of the wisdom of God. Who has ever been in a position to advise the Lord? When has He ever needed advice from anybody? These questions from Isaiah 40 are rhetorical. The prophet makes it clear that the Creator does not depend on His creatures for anything. He may use us to achieve His purposes, yes, but it is we who are entirely dependent on Him for everything (Acts 17:28).

V.35, “Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to Him?” This question from Job 41 goes even further. The whole point here is that the creature can do absolutely nothing to place the Creator under any obligation to him. Who can do for God, anything at all, and then be in a position to say, ‘There, Lord, now You owe me’? That is absurd. Every breath we take, every heartbeat, is a gift from God. He owes us nothing, we owe Him everything, and everything He gives us places us in even greater debt to Him. If someone comes to Christ and submits to Him as his Saviour, for instance, has that man placed the Lord God in debt to him? Or, has God given him salvation as a reward for some evangelical obedience? Certainly not! If someone commits to Christ, it is because God has put it in his heart to do so, because He has drawn him by His irresistible grace and bound him to Christ by the cords of His love. (John 6:44,65).

V.36, “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.” Here is the absolute sovereignty of God laid bare to us in the plainest language. When the apostle asked, v.35, “Who has first given to Him...?”, the answer is that no one has first given to God, and now in v.36 we are told the reason why, for the Lord is Himself the Source, the Means and the End of everything, and there can be no exceptions to that rule! Even Satan and all the powers and principalities he directs are under the authority and power of the Majesty on high.

O dear Christian, think of what this tells us of God’s involvement in our lives, of His providential mercies which are new every morning (Lam. 3:22-24), of how He does according to His will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of

the earth (Dan. 4:35), and of how He is therefore able, as He has promised, to work all things together for good to those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

God knows everything, you see, because He also controls everything. Absolutely nothing happens without the Lord having ordered it, without His having provided all the means for it to come about, and without His having determined all its effects beforehand (Matt. 10:29-31). Do we sometimes fear, beloved, that God has forgotten us? If so, have not we forgotten, rather, that, if we consider the things that only the eyes of faith can see, we will learn our afflictions are actually working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17,18)?

The unbeliever likes to think that he is in control of his own successes and destiny, but he grossly overestimates his own role in these things and fails to see the finger of God in all of it. The believer can also get too easily caught up in that same kind of thinking. Shall we not, instead, be humbled before Him, standing as we do in His holy, awesome and gracious presence? And, if we are so humbled, do we not feel constrained to glorify the Lord our God and seek to enjoy Him forever?

Paul concludes with this practical application, Romans 12:1,2: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." After all that we have been taught in these chapters, Romans 9-11, no better or more compelling counsel could possibly be given than this!

If you are a believer, rejoice in what you have, in all that God has given you in Christ Jesus. If, however, you are an unbeliever, flee to Christ today. If you feel no urgency to do so, pray that God may pour out His Holy Spirit upon you (Ezek. 36:26 & 27), that He may call you through the proclamation of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation to all who come to believe (1 Cor. 1:18), and that, in His so drawing you to Christ, you may come running to Him. But do not put it off, unbeliever. Today is the day of salvation. Our time in this world is only so long, and you cannot be sure that you will ever have this same opportunity again.

