

## **Our Incomprehensible God** **Romans 11:33-35**

**December 8, 2019**  
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As you may imagine with young children, I am regularly re-reading children's literature, re-watching children's videos, and re-listening to children's songs. I have enjoyed it mostly. But if I never watch *Frozen* again, it will be okay with me. Some of them remind me of my own childhood. Much of it is really, really well done.

An example of this is Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*. It's the story of an elephant named Horton who hears the sound of somebody emanating from a tiny speck of dust. He doesn't know this very, very small person, but he is compelled to care for whoever it is and the speck of dust they live on no matter what. In fact, Horton has discovered a whole city of little people called Whos who live in Whoville on the speck of dust. The Whos of Whoville didn't realize they were tiny. They lived their lives like they were big, important, significant. They had no idea their world was a speck of dust or how huge a real elephant is. That would blow your minds.

Horton the Elephant does everything he can to protect the dust. The other animals, like the monkey and the kangaroo, think he is crazy. Horton implores the Whos to make as much sound as they can so the other animals not blessed with big ears could hear them. All the residents of Whoville blow trumpets and make as much noise as they can until finally the other animals hear them too. Then Horton and the monkey and all the animals protect the tiny bit of dust, the town of Whoville, and all the little Whos who live there.

It's a great story. For the purpose of our message today, I want you to think about our lives like the Whos in Whoville. They thought they were big, but only because they didn't realize in proportion to the elephant, they were incredibly small.

A proper reading of the Bible is very similar to *Horton Hears a Who*. It puts us in our place of smallness. It shows us God is huge, huger than even an elephant. Perhaps more than any other book, Romans puts us in our place in comparison to the greatness of our God.

*"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 ESV)

I'm saving verse 36 for next week. Today we look at verses 33-35. Let's remember where it sits in Romans. It is here at the end of Romans 11 and the end of Paul's explanation of Israel and the Gentiles and God's unfolding drama of redemption. It also is the conclusion of everything so far in all of Romans. Romans is easily outlined with chapters 1-11 - Gospel Doctrine and chapters 12-16 - Gospel Application. The five chapters left are wonderful, yet they rest on this rich, gospel, doctrinal teaching in chapters 1-11.

In these three verses, Paul climbs the mountain of the gospel, looks back at the expanse—the beauty, the glory, the wonder of the gospel—and gushes praise.

*"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!"* (Romans 11:33)

Three qualities of God—riches, wisdom, and knowledge—are all described by “depth.” But it’s “*Oh, the depth.*” So, depth here is not defining a depth, but rather marveling at it.

Go to any public swimming pool and they will very carefully stencil around the pool the depth of it. 3 feet. 4 feet. 9 feet. Why? Because if you don’t know how to swim, you need to know when the water is over your head. “*Oh, the depth*” means that each of these qualities of God is way over our heads; way beyond our comprehension and that really is the main point of this whole section and this whole sermon. The God you think you know is far greater than you or I can imagine. Depth is spatial, but God is not. “*Oh, the depth*” is to marvel at God and acknowledge that he is more, deeper, and bigger than we can imagine.

Regarding wisdom and knowledge, “*Wisdom directs all things to the best end; knowledge knows that end and issue.*” (Bengel)<sup>1</sup> God both knows everything AND his outworking of it in all his purposes and plans is perfect. How? Infinite depth of wisdom and knowledge. If God had all knowledge but no wisdom, he’d be like the brilliant scientist who can’t find his way home. If he was very wise but without knowledge, he would be like a 5-star general with all communication lines cut. Able, but without knowledge.

But God has perfect and complete knowledge of all things, all time, all options matched with perfect wisdom directing, guiding, and purposing all things to their greatest possible goal. What is that greatest possible goal?

Look at verse 36, “*To him be glory forever. Amen.*” Everything God purposes is toward the ultimate end of his own glory. More on that next week, but see that God is the combination of the highest possible knowledge matched with the greatest possible wisdom directing toward the greatest possible goal, *the glory of God*.

“*How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*” (Romans 11:33) Unsearchable and inscrutable. In the Greek these are nearly synonyms. Both refer to something unknowable, incomprehensible, and unfathomable. And what of God is unsearchable? His *judgments* and his *ways*.

What judgments? What ways? The ones he has spent 11 chapters explaining. From *the wrath of God* in chapters 1-3 against mankind’s wickedness, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23) to God’s purpose to save and justify the unrighteous through Jesus’ death on the cross in chapter 3. We all are unrighteous—even Abraham—and stand in need of justification, which God provides through faith, not by any work or effort or merit of our own. The result in chapter 5 is that we have peace with God through Jesus. This grace is never freedom to sin but the amazing freedom not to sin as we have been united with Jesus (chapter 6). Such love, sovereign love (chapter 8), such grace, sovereign grace (chapter 9)! Grace that continues to have a plan and purpose for Israel even as the gospel opens wide the door for all humanity to believe and be saved (chapters 10-11)!

Then he says, “*How unsearchable his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*” In other words, **what Paul is saying is unsearchable and inscrutable are not the plans of God we don’t know, but the plans of God we do know.** Did you get that? Let me say it again, what Paul is saying is unsearchable and inscrutable are not the plans of God we don’t know, but the plans of God we do know.

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<sup>1</sup> Bengel as quoted by Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 428.

*"It is a mistake, however, to think that God's incomprehensibility applies only to his secret, unrevealed counsel. What God has not revealed does not come with the compass for our knowledge; it is inapprehensible. What is not apprehend [sic] is also incomprehensible. But the most significant aspect of incomprehensibility is that it applies to what God has revealed."* (Murray)<sup>2</sup>

I talked with a woman this week who had questions about predestination. I did my best to explain it in terms of the mystery of how God created a natural and moral world in which we make decisions for which we are responsible, yet all things happen according to his eternal purpose. To hold to this requires we believe in a very big God with purposes that go beyond us. Eliminate election and predestination and you have a God who is smaller, more understandable, and perhaps more a God like we humans would like him to be.

Then you get to 11:33 and the Apostle and author who understood perhaps more than anyone else in all of Scripture the deep doctrines of God, and his conclusion about the plans God has revealed to us is, *"how unsearchable his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"*

What sort of God is Paul saying Romans 1-11 points to? Small God you can understand or massive God that blows your mind? Or to say it this way, if you are struggling with the teachings of Romans 9-11 and God's sovereign love or God's sovereign grace, if our teaching position kind of blows your mind, doesn't what Paul says here indicate the "blow your mind interpretation" is the right one?

Paul could have gone through predestination and election and then said, *just in case you aren't getting it yet, don't think I'm suggesting something that's really that difficult to understand. Don't take God's sovereignty to mean that we aren't totally free to do what we want free from God. I'm not suggesting anything like that!*

Instead he gets to the end of the doctrinal section and admits that all this blows his mind too. So, you can be confident you are seeing it the way Paul sees it if you end up shaking your head in wonder. We should take comfort that if these deep doctrines of the gospel are for the brilliant and Spirit-inspired Apostle *unsearchable*, then they surely are unsearchable for normal people like us.

He doesn't stop there. As he often does, he turns to the Old Testament to reinforce his point. Here from Isaiah and Job: *"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?"* (Romans 11:34-35) Truly, God needs no counselor or advisor. He also needs no benefactor, *"who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"* The idea here is that all things come from God, so who has ever put God in his debt? To whom could God ever owe anything?

Do you see the correlation to the previous verses? He has all wisdom and knowledge, so who could ever counsel him? He has all riches, so to whom could he ever be indebted? Taken as a whole, these verses pound home the greatness and grandeur of our God. In knowledge. In wisdom. In riches. Who is like him?

## **Application**

So, what does this mean for us? How do we apply it?

## **Right theology should always lead to doxology**

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<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, p. 104.

*Doxology* isn't a word we use much but we should. It basically means "glory." Doxology is "to give glory; to give praise." We might use the word *worship*. The reason I point this out is because of the location of this praise passage in Romans. For nearly 11 chapters Paul has gone deep on the gospel and God's ways and purposes. He has unfolded God's amazing ways in saving sinners and making us righteous. It is the richest 11 chapters of doctrine in all the Bible. What is Paul's response? Silence? Does he merely clear his throat and go on?

No. All this truth isn't merely information for Paul. This is no professorial lecture. He wrote these chapters with tears in his eyes. Tears of sorrow, repentance, gladness, and joy. The truths of the gospel were welling up in his heart and he gets to verse 33 and he just can't contain it anymore. He bursts forth with joy! "*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*" The deepest explanation of the gospel produces the greatest apostolic joy.

We live in a day where many church folks are less interested in theology and more interested in the superficial. I sat in a gathering of pastors where one pastor of a very large megachurch in the South railed against teaching doctrine because people aren't interested in that anymore. It doesn't move them anymore. I recall hearing John Piper explain why. Doctrine doesn't move people in the church anymore because doctrine doesn't move pastors anymore.

This explains so much of popular evangelicalism. When God doesn't excite us anymore, we need something to get people to church. And what's that? Hype. The Show. Dumb it down. Something that stirs people's emotions and interest other than God.

Look at the bestselling Christian books for the last 20 years. How many of them are about God? None. How many are about the gospel? None. The bestsellers are something like 7 ways to improve your life, improve your marriage, improve your parenting. Those are important things, but not the most important. Is this coincidence or an indication of where the church is at? May I ask, where are you at? Where are we as a church? I make it no secret that I desire to pastor toward a deep and rich doctrine-loving congregation. We are doing Romans after all.

A.W. Tozer said, "*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*"<sup>3</sup> Superficial theology creates superficial Christians or perhaps, superficial *professing* Christians. Christian culture is so awash in this that most of us don't even realize it. We have swum in the shallow end of the pool for so long we think that's all there is. Then when you come to Romans, it's not just the deep end of the pool, but the deep end of the ocean. Here we discover that the deep things of God are not only mind blowing but will produce a better doxology. A humbler Christian. A grace-shocked and grace-filled Christian who lives in wonder that such a massive God would purpose to love and to save someone like me.

### **Right theology should always lead to wonder**

The *place* of these verses tells us theology should lead to worship. The *content* of these verses says theology should always lead to wonder. If you listen to somebody or perceive in your own heart that you've kind of arrived in your grasp of biblical things, beware. That is the opposite vibe of someone who actually understands them.

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<sup>3</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 1.

There is an old adage that *the most confident theologian is a second-year seminary student*. I know, I was one of them. They have a little knowledge about a few things, but the way we can know we know things is when we begin to realize how much we don't know. It's like marriage. I knew a lot more about marriage when I was single. Ask a couple married 50 years, *what's the secret to staying married?* and they shake their heads in wonder. But God? We have him figured out. No. We haven't begun to understand him. That isn't to say we can't be confident in our assertions if Scripture backs them up. But the vibe of pride that comes across is a sure indicator of someone who hasn't dealt seriously with how unsearchable God's judgments are and how inscrutable his ways.

*Oh yeah, Pastor Steve. I've studied. I've got things figured out. Try me. What's unsearchable?*

- *God is sovereign over all AND we are responsible for our choices*
- *Jesus is eternally, simultaneously, completely God AND human*
- *Scripture was written by men and yet completely the very words of God*
- *Humans reproduce naturally but each one is given an eternal soul*
- *The human body dies but the real us, the soul, lives forever*
- *In eternity past, God purposed evil without being personally responsible for evil*
- *Jesus died on the cross imputed with the guilt for sins and people who didn't exist yet*
- *We personally believe, but God causes us to believe*
- *God created everything that is out of material nothingness*
- *Resurrection reunites the separated soul from bodies, billions of whom have decayed to nothing*
- *Jesus, the eternal God, was born of a virgin*

You got all that figured out? Are you more insightful than Paul? Paul's example is to know it all but still wonder. Here is the proper response if you know accurately the little that can be known about God. *Phhsstphew...* Wonder. Now maybe you are beginning to comprehend something.

### **The doctrines of grace put us in our place**

*Pastor Steve, did you have any pushback on all that election and predestination stuff? A little. Did anyone leave the church over it? A few. What did we teach?* That somehow in the infinity of who God is, he purposed all things, knew all things, and is doing all things exactly the way he desires.

Why don't we humans like that? The natural us does not like the doctrines of grace. Why? Romans 1:21. "[We do] not honor him as God or give thanks to him." Our pride revolts against anything that diminishes us. And yet the doctrines of grace do just that. They put us in our place. A place we naturally don't like. They make us very small and reveal God as bigger than we can begin to comprehend.

But it is there, in our place of smallness, sinfulness, depravity, and desperation that the expanse of God's love for us, the wee little people, blows our minds. Isn't that what Paul says here?

Or to say it this way, if you were to read, *Horton Hears a Who*, where do you see yourself in the story? Yeah, I see myself as the elephant. I see myself as the kangaroo. But if we were to read Romans in one hand and Dr. Seuss in the other, we wouldn't see ourselves as the elephant or the kangaroo. We aren't even the tiny piece of dust. We are the little people

who think our dust is the whole world. Even this analogy is insufficient as it is much easier for a Who in Whoville to understand an elephant than it is for a human to comprehend Almighty God. Why?

*"For from him and through him and to him are ALL things. To him be glory forever. Amen."*  
(Romans 11:36, emphasis added)

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