



Last week our entire family got together in Arizona. There were 11 of us, which included our three kids, their spouses and our three grandchildren as well. On Monday several of us hiked up Camelback Mountain. It ended up being a bit longer and steeper than any of us expected. The trail gained about 1,300 feet over 1.5 miles, and then the hike down was just as challenging. But along the way we took a few breathers. We paused and gazed out over the wide expanse of desert and far away mountains and just caught our breath. Without a few of those breathers our hike would have been not just more difficult but far less enjoyable.

Today, as we continue in our study of Paul's letter to the Romans, we have the opportunity to take a breather. We've climbed a really challenging part of the trail in Romans 9-11 where Paul articulated God's plan for Israel in light of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. He said Israel's hardened condition is partial in that there are genuine believers among them, but it is also temporary because there will be a restoration of genuine faith among them in the future. In his sovereign wisdom, God chose to use Israel's rejection of Jesus as a means of reaching the Gentiles. But then it is through his abundant grace shown to the Gentiles that Israel will become envious to know that grace as well. So the tragedy of Israel's unbelief is used by God to reach the Gentiles, and that in turn will lead to reaching the Jews. In all of this, God hasn't broken his promises, besmirched his character, altered his plans, forsaken his people, nor ignored the Gentiles. In fact, he's shown even in the midst of human rebellion he'll use all things to bring about his eternal purposes.

With all of that, Paul stops. He pauses. He takes a breather, gazing out over the landscape of God's eternal plan. He tries to take it all in and he cries out,

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

**How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!**

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?"

"Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay them?"

For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

(Romans 11:33-36)

I think you can see Paul is out of breath here. His careful analysis and his reasoned argument have given way to astonishment and wonder. Scholars call this a doxology. That word comes from two other words: *doxa* means glory and *logos* means word. Together they mean "glorifying word" or an expression of praise and worship that glorifies God. Here in this short hymn-like poem, Paul has turned from theology to doxology; from thinking about God and his eternal plan to worshipping God because of his eternal plan. Let me ask you, does your theology fuel your doxology? Does your reflection of God and his eternal plan leave you breathless? If not, consider what Paul says here about God and his plan.

Astonished Exclamations

He starts out with two astonished exclamations about God. First, he points to the *"depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God."* We're intrigued with deep places because they're so mysterious. The deepest part of the ocean is near Guam and it's 36,200 feet deep. It's called Challenger Deep. Scientists know more about what's on the surface of Mars than what's down there. Here, Paul is astonished by the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. It's like our mind is a mere puddle; his is an ocean!

His wisdom is unfathomable. It's been said, "The wisdom of God devised a way for the love of God to deliver sinners from the wrath of God while not compromising the righteousness of God." If God can solve that problem, he can solve anything you're facing today. He always knows the way. His wisdom is deep.

His knowledge is deep as well. He knows the number of hairs on your head, the number of galaxies in the universe, and who will be the next president. He knows what your kids will be like when they grow up, and who will win the next round of March Madness. His knowledge is without flaw. How many times have you made a decision about what to do next, but it blew up in your face because you had the wrong information? God knows everything!

But one exclamation isn't enough. So he says, *"How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out."* God's judgments are simply his activity in the world; the way he operates; his sovereign decisions. His judgments are unfathomable. His dealings with the world are untraceable. Tracing God's ways is as futile as tracking footprints on the sea. His ways are beyond

us. We see the events, but we have no idea how he'll use them to accomplish his purposes.

Our worship is ruled both by what we know and what we don't know. Scientists are constantly making new discoveries that explain what was once unexplainable. For example, they've discovered there's something unknown exerting great gravitational force, keeping galaxies bound together. They call it "dark matter," and although we can measure its presence and see its effects, we can't really see it or feel it. Scientists are in awe of what they know about dark matter, but they're also humbled by what they don't know. Worship is like that. You can't worship what you don't know, but the more you know him and his ways, the more you realize how little you know, which leads you into greater worship.

This tension is seen in the beliefs of Albert Einstein. When he was asked if he believed in God he said, "The problem involved is too vast for our limited minds. We're in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It doesn't know how. It doesn't understand the languages in which they're written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books, but doesn't know what it is. That...is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see the universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws, but only dimly understand these laws."

In one sense he's right, but in another sense he's wrong. He's wrong because we know so much more about God and his plan than that! We know who wrote the books, and we can understand the language in which they're written. The Bible talks about many different mysteries that have now been revealed to us: the mystery of God, the mystery of lawlessness, the mystery of the church, the mystery of godliness. But it's also true the more we know, the more we see how little we know. Who can fathom the depths of the Trinity, or how the sovereignty of God relates to the freedom of humans, or how Jesus could be both fully God and fully man? So even though we know a lot about God and his plan, we can't possibly fathom all of it. And, again, all of this fuels our worship.

But Paul isn't finished. He's still breathless. He's still pausing and taking in the landscape of God's greatness. He goes on and asks a few rhetorical questions that form the basis for what he just said about God's ways being unsearchable.

Rhetorical Questions

He asks, "*Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?*" Well, I certainly have. I advise God all the time! I often know exactly what he should do. How about you? I could give God some advice on how to deal with ISIS and even who our next President should be. But how ridiculous to think I know better than God!

In asking these questions, Paul is quoting from Isaiah 40:13. Israel was in captivity in Babylon. God makes a promise to the exiles that he'll bring them back to the Promised Land. But Israel is filled with doubts and fears because they're so weak and Babylon is so strong. So God assures them with these words,

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,

or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

**Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales
and the hills in a balance?**

**Who can fathom the Spirit (mind) of the Lord,
or instruct the Lord as his counselor?**

**Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?**

Isaiah 40:12-14

See what Paul is saying? Just as God promised to deliver Israel against overwhelming odds in years past, so too has he planned history in such a way that Israel will one day be restored. It seems impossible. Look at Israel today. If you're a Christian, it's against the law to even engage in missionary activity in Israel. There are more Palestinian Christians than Jewish Christians. How is God going to pull this one off? He has a plan. He's extended salvation to the Gentiles which will make unbelieving Jews jealous of God's grace. Who would have thought of that? Who can grasp the mind of the Lord in such a way that they might give him advice on the best course of action? Nobody!

Then he asks, "*Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?*" People back then believed they could do that. They believed God actually needed the sacrifices they offered to him. If they didn't give God food, he'd starve. So they thought, if we feed him, he'll give us good crops, good families and good health. He'll owe us. And so they brought their sacrifices every day. We do the same thing. We give a little cash to the beggar on the street, we go to church two weeks in a row, and we somehow think God owes us for that.

But God doesn't owe anyone anything. When Paul asks, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" he's quoting from Job 41. You know Job's story. He was a good man who feared God, but God allowed him to experience immense suffering. He lost his entire family. He lost his fortune and his health. As a result, Job doubted God's wisdom. He passionately complained to God that his suffering was unjust. In Job 38-41 God responds to Job and rebukes him for questioning his justice in running the world. At the end of the speech God essentially says, "Listen Job, everything in the universe belongs to me. I know what I'm doing

and who are you to question me. You can't give me any advice that would somehow obligate me to repay you."

In 1969 physicist Willard Boyle invented the concept of an electronic eye. He provided the science behind digital cameras known as a charged-coupled device or CCD. This revolutionized photography, as light could now be captured electronically instead of on film. In 2009 Boyle was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics. A few years after he invented CCD technology, Boyle walked into a store to buy a new digital camera. While there, the salesman tried to explain the intricacies of the digital camera, but stopped, feeling it was too complicated for the guy to understand. Now Boyle was normally a humble man, but he couldn't help interrupt the man, and said bluntly, "No need to explain. I invented it."

At times we act like that salesman in our relationship with God. We try to tell God how life works or how we think it should work. But God simply responds, "No need to explain. I invented life." Instead of giving him advice, we should fall on our knees. If we don't, it's because our understanding of God is far too small. Our doxology is anemic because our theology is stunted!

But, again, Paul asks the question, Why? Why is it that no one can become God's counselor or give to him so that repayment is necessary?

Theological Affirmation

The reason comes in v. 36. Paul says, "*For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*" What does this mean?

From him are all things. God is the source of all things. There was a time when there was nothing but God. There was no sin and darkness but God dwelt in ineffable light. There was no earth, yet his throne stood fast and firm. There was no heaven, but his glory was unbounded. There were no people, but perfect love was shared among Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is completely self-sufficient. He said to Moses, "I am who I am." All things are from him.

But that is not all. All things are through him. Not only is he the source of all things but he's the instrument through which all things came into being. There was no raw material to work with. He created the universe out of nothing. John 1:3 says, "*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*"

Several years ago I was on an airplane. I can't even recall where I was going but I got into a conversation with a man next to me. He was from Calgary, a very beautiful part of Canada. I'd never been to Calgary, but of course I'd heard of its mountains and breathtaking scenery, and so I said something like, "Wow! I've heard the scenery is spectacular there. I'd love to visit someday." At that, he just kind of shrugged his shoulders and said, "The mountains are really nothing special. They mean nothing to me."

I kind of pushed back a little and said, "But they're so beautiful. What a wonderful place to live!" He looked at me kind of blandly and just said, "But they're useless. They serve no purpose."

That sounds ridiculous to most of us, but how often do we see life in a purely utilitarian way? How seldom do we stand back and say with the psalmist, "*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?*" (Psalm 8:3-4). As I was walking the trail to the top of Camelback Mountain, the temptation was to focus so intently on finding the right rock to place my weight on next that I never stopped and looked at the magnificence of what was around me. How often do we stop in wonder that all things are from him and through him? It's been said, "Wonder is involuntary praise." When was the last time you stared into the sky at night and tried to imagine the immensity of it all?

But get this: Not only are all things from him and through him, but all things are for him. God isn't just the beginning of all things, he's also the end of all things. He's the goal. He's the summation. It's like when the final pieces of the puzzle of history are put in their place, the image we'll see is that of Jesus. He's the end. He's the goal.

And because all things are for him and because he's the goal of all things, Paul concludes with these words, "*To him be the glory, forever. Amen.*" To glorify God is the chief end not just of man, but of every particle in the universe. When eventually we stand in glory, we'll no doubt be given a tour of human history and be shown how in one event after another God was at work to accomplish his good and perfect will. And do you know what we'll do? We'll fall on our knees. There'll be such awareness of his wisdom and knowledge, his grace and mercy, his holiness and justice that all creation will bow before him.

There's so much we can learn about worship from all this. I want to encourage you to memorize these verses. I believe they can change your life in at least a several ways:

First, they challenge us to examine our desire for worship.

John Piper writes, "If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great." He's saying we can fill our heart so much with the pleasures, ambitions and worries of life that our hearts get full. We try to stuff a bit of God in there to make it all better, and it doesn't work. We won't feel God's presence. There's something blocking the connection; the intimacy.

How do you reignite that passion? Maybe you start with confession. Confess to him that you've allowed your soul to be stuffed with small things. Just as saying "I'm sorry" can re-establish intimacy in a relationship, it can reconnect you with God as well.

If we don't do that, each time we let something go unresolved, a wall starts building up between us and him. Or maybe we need to find a place of solitude, pick a worship song and let the words penetrate our hearts. Listen, sing, make the lyrics your prayer. And then take some time to read the Bible with the intention of hearing God speak to you. It's his living and active word and he wants to speak to you. Make that your focus as you read his word. Don't just dissect the words, let the words dissect you.

Second, these words from Paul remind us that our theology and our doxology must go hand in hand. If you have theology (truth and doctrine) without worship, something is very wrong. Truth isn't something just to be analyzed and dissected, truth is a gateway into the praise and worship of God. We must never study God and his ways in a detached, cool manner. We have to let ourselves be moved, humbled, comforted and challenged by it. A lot of churches have great Bible teaching that feeds the mind, but their worship is like dry toast. We want worship that's heartfelt, passionate.

But it's also true that our doxology must be fueled by theology. In other words, worship and praise that's mindless and void of deep reflection on the person and work of God and Christ is empty. Consider this, Paul asked in v. 34, *"Who has known the mind of the Lord?"* He asks the same thing in 1 Corinthians 2:16. Listen to what he says, *"Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"* Again, same question. But then he says something we don't see here in Romans. He says, *"But we have the mind of Christ."* That's an amazing statement! That doesn't mean we can understand everything Christ understood, but God has given us a capacity for spiritual truth and an ability to understand the things of God that goes beyond the merely human. That should fuel our worship.

Third, these words of Paul remind us we don't need to understand everything to praise the God who does. There are

those who feel they can't worship God unless they understand everything about him. But even with the mind of Christ that's impossible. "A God whose counsel we could fully grasp, whose ways we could fully discern, and whose nature we could fully explain in our human minds, would be a fairly limited God" (Tim Keller). But God is far bigger than us. This means we can worship even in the midst of great pain and suffering. As followers of Jesus we're not immune to tragedy, affliction and crisis. We're not teflon people to whom nothing sticks. We grieve, we cry, we sometimes even complain to God. We don't have the answers to the "Why" question. We say everything happens for a reason, but we don't always know the reason. In fact, the Bible never says everything happens for a reason. Instead, it says everything happens for a purpose. But in those times of deep pain these words of Paul can help us yield in trust and faith to the greater wisdom and knowledge of God. This past week we were looking at this passage as a staff and one of our female staff shared how these verses anchored her in a time of great pain as she experienced a miscarriage. When you're suffering, when you struggle to see the reason for what's happened in your life, you can bow before the Lord and say,

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

**How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!**

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?"

**"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?"**

For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.