

IN PRAISE OF GOD
ROMANS 11:33-36

John Wesley Powell was a government explorer who led a boat expedition through the Grand Canyon in 1869. He wrote a description of his impressions of that trip entitled, “The Most Sublime Spectacle on Earth” in his book, *Canyons of the Colorado* (1895):

The Grand Canyon of the Colorado is a canyon composed of many canyons. It is a composite of thousands, of tens of thousands, of gorges, in like manner, each wall of the canyon is a composite structure, a wall composed of many walls, but never a repetition. Every one of these almost innumerable gorges is a world of beauty in itself. In the Grand Canyon there are thousands of gorges like that below Niagara Falls, and there are a thousand Yosemitees. Yet all these canyons unite to form one grand canyon, the most sublime spectacle on the earth. Pluck up Mt. Washington by the roots to the level of the sea and drop it headfirst into the Grand Canyon, and the dam will not force its waters over the walls. Pluck up the Blue Ridge and hurl it into the Grand Canyon, and it will not fill it.



Powell’s task was almost impossible: how do you describe the indescribable? How do you put words to things that are transcendent?

That is even more the task of the apostle Paul as he sums up the work of God in salvation. What kind of exclamation point can you put on the salvation of sinners — Jews and Gentiles alike? How can you explain the mercy of that salvation and the perplexity of Jews and Gentiles united together?

As Paul concludes his discussion of God’s sovereignty in salvation (Rom. 9-11) and as he is about to begin applying all the doctrinal truths he has explained (Rom. 1-11), he explodes in a benediction of praise. After he has taught and before he applies his teaching, he will worship:

LET THE REVELATION OF GOD’S SALVATION LEAD YOU TO PRAISE GOD.

What we know of salvation should lead us to humble satisfaction in and worship of God. Theology and worship are partners; rich theology leads to deep worship. **This “song” of praise is one that is sung in four parts:**

1. An **EXCLAMATION** of Praise (v. 33)
2. Two **QUESTIONS** for Praise (vv. 34-35)
3. An **AFFIRMATION** of Praise (v. 36a)
4. An **ASCRPTION** of Praise (v. 36b)

1. An **EXCLAMATION** of Praise (v. 33)

• Praise God for His limitless resources

- ✓ As Paul begins this benediction, he uses the exclamatory **Oh!** This is his emotional response of awe. He has contemplated who sovereignly saves and sanctifies sinners and he is overwhelmed by the magnitude of God's actions towards sinners who deserve only God's wrath but receive grace.
- ✓ What drives Paul to praise is the limitless resources of God — **the depth of the riches** of God.
 - This is the only time Paul uses this phrase. He has previously spoken of the riches of His kindness, patience, and glory (2:4; 9:23; 11:12; cf. Eph. 1:7).
 - When Paul uses the word **depth**, he is intimating that there are things that are beyond our comprehension — cf. **Dan. 2:21-22** — the deep (**profound**) things are equated to the hidden things. There are aspects of God's nature and work that are so deep they are "hidden" to us. They are "unreachable" to our minds — we cannot go that deeply.
 - In this phrase Paul is pointing to the limitless nature of God's **riches**. Whatever attribute of God's character we might talk about, it is beyond being used up or consumed. Like a miner plumbing the depths of the earth to dig out the treasures of gold and precious jewels, the one who contemplates God's nature will not reach a limit of those treasures.
 - We should also note that the unreachable riches of God are not only the things that He gives us, but they are the things that He is (**Col. 1:27**) — in His death and resurrection, Christ demonstrated (something of) the vastness of the treasure that Christ always has been and is.
- ✓ Paul identifies the richness of God's treasures as two particular attributes related to knowledge:

• Praise God for the limitless resources of His knowledge

- ✓ There is a distinction between God's **wisdom** and **knowledge** (used together only two more times).
 - "Knowledge" refers to God's exhaustive understanding of all things:
 - ... He knows all things in time (past, present, and future)
 - ... He knows every potential event of every circumstance in every place
 - ... He knows all things intuitively (He never needs to learn anything)
 - ... He knows everything on the macro level — everything that happens on earth and in the atmosphere and in the farthest portions of the farthest galaxy
 - ... He knows everything at the micro level — everything that happens in molecules and atoms, and protons, neutrons, electrons, and quarks
 - ... He knows all thoughts, motives, and desires of every individual's heart and mind
 - ... There are things that we know God knows that we do not know; but we cannot conceive of the things He knows that are even beyond our comprehension.

- In this context, His **knowledge** is of every man, all sin, and man's inability to save himself. It may also be a reference to His "foreknowledge" in choosing those who will be His in salvation (v. 2).
- **Wisdom** refers to how God arranges and orders all things to accomplish His purposes — especially His plan of salvation. (E.g., who would have known the wisdom of vv. 25-27?)
- ✓ But there is also an obvious overlap between the terms, and we probably shouldn't press the differences too far. Paul simply wants to lead us to worship God for His knowledge and the discernment and application of that knowledge (Ps. 94:11; 1 Cor. 2:7-11).
- ✓ Not only is God rich in knowledge, but what He *does* is also beyond our comprehension:

- **Praise God for the limitless resources in His actions**

- ✓ God's **judgments** are **unsearchable**. Judgments might refer to His judicial action against sinners — His wrath (2:2-3; 5:16). But more likely it is a reference to His decisions, decrees, and evaluations. It refers to His decisions about salvation history — particularly the election of sinners (9:18; 11:7). Those plans are **unsearchable** — they are inscrutable and beyond our understanding (remember, there are **depths** to God that are unreachable to us and our minds).
 - ✓ God's **ways** are **unfathomable**. The paths God takes are sometimes plain and revealed to us, but many times they are incomprehensible — "who'd a thunk it?" We can only know as He reveals.
 - ✓ Paul is likely thinking especially about the mystery of Jew and Gentile both saved in God's plan (32).
 - ✓ Paul is leading us in praise of God who does things beyond our comprehension, especially in salvation. Cf. Dt. 29:29; Dan. 4:35; Ps. 36:6.
- One lesson in this verse is that the God who is incomprehensible has made Himself comprehensible.
 - ✓ Because God is infinite, He can never be fully comprehended, known, or understood by finite men. That's what this verse, along with passages like Isaiah 40 teach.
 - ✓ Not only can we not know everything about God, but even when God has revealed Himself, what He has revealed is not fully knowable to us — it is "inapprehensible." We can't wrap our tiny brains around infinite truth (which is why He can reveal Himself and His grace to us for eternity, Eph. 2:7).
 - ✓ But this verse also affirms that this God who is incomprehensible, is still knowable. God's knowledge and actions are transcendent and infinitely beyond us, but He has still revealed Himself to us and given us minds to comprehend Him. The unknowable God makes Himself knowable.
 - ✓ We cannot know everything about God and His plan of salvation, but we can know something. And those ways of God that are "unsearchable" are what Paul has just revealed, particularly in chapter 11. That revelation is what leads Paul to praise.

2. Two QUESTIONS for Praise (vv. 34-35)

- Paul's exclamations of praise in v. 33 are reinforced by two questions that provoke praise.
- The first question is taken from **Isaiah 40:13-14** (which Paul also quotes in 1 Cor. 2:16).
 - ✓ In Isaiah's ministry, Israel (10 Northern tribes) was taken into captivity by Assyria. Isaiah is writing to warn Judah to repent, or she also would be taken into captivity in Babylon (esp. 1-39).
 - ✓ In Isaiah 40, the prophet begins to give hope and comfort to that Judah that would be taken in captivity. He asks five questions, beginning in v. 12. Those questions assert the immensity of God that is unequalled by any other power. All others are created; He is the uncreated.
 - ✓ The questions point directly to the power of God to liberate Israel from captivity in Babylon — and fulfill God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). "Israel is so weak and Babylon so strong, how will Israel be freed?" The questions assert that God has a plan and no nation — not even Babylon — can overwhelm that plan (**Is. 40:17**).
 - ✓ Isaiah's question (v. 13) about the mind of the Lord is "who has the capacity to know God's mind?" The question is not "who knows what God knows," but "who can even evaluate the breadth and depth of God's knowledge?" We don't have a measuring stick that large.
 - ✓ Some might suppose that they can **know God's mind** so Isaiah further asks, **who has become His counselor** — who has guided and directed God in what He does? No one. Man does not advise God; God counsels man (**Ps. 19:7ff**). Ironically, this word "counsel" was used primarily of men planning together against Christ — and we repeatedly see their futility (**Mt. 26:4; 27:1**). Man has no kind of knowledge that supplants the knowledge and wisdom of God.
 - ✓ This question reaffirms what is stated in v. 33 about the depth of the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge. What God knows and plans are infinitely beyond our comprehension.
- The second question is a paraphrased quotation from **Job 35:7; 41:11**.
 - ✓ In **Job 35:5ff**, Elihu responds to Job and his friends and says that just as the clouds are higher than man, so God is higher than man and unaffected by man's sin. When God is merciful, it's not because man has obligated God to act, but only because God is gracious and kind. God is not bribed by man.
 - ✓ In Job 41, God reminds Job that no one can stand against God or claim that God is indebted to him; if men "panic" when in front of Leviathan (crocodile), what will they do before God (**41:9-11**)?
 - ✓ The point of this quotation is that no one has contributed to God's character and made God a debtor to him. No amount of "good deeds" obligates God to act for any man. All men have received first from God — everything we have is from Him; nothing He has is from us (e.g., **1 Chron. 29:14**).
 - ✓ As we think about sin, forgiveness, justification, salvation, and God's people, no one has ever made a contribution to God that has necessitated a repayment from God.
 - ✓ As one writer said, God "can finance His own undertakings."

- Paul asks these rhetorical questions, but the unstated answer is clear — “No one!”
 - ✓ God is supremely beyond us and our abilities. This benediction is designed to exalt God and humble us. But it also implies the magnitude of God’s grace:

“How utterly sweet is the knowledge that our Heavenly Father knows us completely. No talebearer can inform on us, no enemy can make an accusation stick; no forgotten skeleton can come tumbling out of some hidden closet to abash us and expose our past; no unsuspected weakness in our characters can come to light to turn God away from us, since He knew us utterly before we knew Him and called us to Himself in the full knowledge of everything that was against us.” [Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*.]

- ✓ That’s what makes God inscrutable to us — He knows us and He acts on our behalf. Oh, friends, let that drive us to praise Him and delight in Him above all things.

3. An **AFFIRMATION** of Praise (v. 36a)

- Why are the declarations and questions of vv. 33-35 true? Because (**for**) of the nature and work of God.
- Paul makes three short affirmations about the nature of God in this verse that affirm that God is transcendent and great (we will unpack this more next week):
 - ✓ **From Him** means that God is the *source* of all life and substance — both physical and spiritual.
 - ✓ **Through Him** means that God is the *agent* of all life and substance. He is the means of all life.
 - ✓ **To Him** means that God is the *goal* of all life and substance — everything and every living being exists for His glory. We and our salvation are not about us, ultimately (v. 25); we are about Him.
 - ✓ **All things** means *all things* — there is nothing in existence anywhere that doesn’t fit this description. It is all for God and all for His glory.
- Why should we praise God? Because there is nothing that exists without God being behind it. He is the originator of all things and the sustainer of all things and He is the source of every salvation (1 Cor. 8:6).
 - ✓ Paul makes clear elsewhere that because God is above all things, then we should worship Him. He is first, so He gets what only the supreme God can receive (Col. 1:16-17).
 - ✓ Here his emphasis is not just that God is above all things in authority, but He is above all people in salvation — He has made salvation available, so we should praise Him.
 - I — one of the rejecting people of 1:20-21 — have been saved. Let that produce worship.
 - I — one of the great mass of unrighteous people (3:10ff) — have been declared righteous. Let that produce worship.
 - I — one of the enemies of God, have been freed from God’s wrath and reconciled as a friend to God (5:8-10). Let that produce worship.

- I — one of Adam’s sons, have been crucified with Christ so that sin is no longer my master (6:8-11). Let that produce worship.
- I — one of those who was against God, now has God for me, giving me all things and praying for me (8:31-33). Let that produce worship.
- I — one who was completely outside God’s plan for His chosen people as a Gentile, have been grafted into God’s plan and saved alongside Israel (11:17-18). Let that produce humble worship.

4. An **ASCRPTION** of Praise (v. 36b)

- Because everything is from God and for God, Paul makes the only possible conclusion and doesn’t just call us to praise, but himself praises God — **to Him be the glory forever**.
 - ✓ God’s glory is the revelation of all that He is, and delight in what He is. So when Paul says “to Him be the glory,” it is a way of affirming that he finds eternal satisfaction in God’s character and work.
 - ✓ Unregenerate men fail to acknowledge, give thanks, or honor God’s glory (1:21, 25).
 - ✓ Conversely, Paul repeatedly exalts the name of God. He is consumed with worship of God (16:27; Gal. 1:4-5; Phil. 4:20; 1 Tim. 1:16; 2 Tim. 4:18).
 - ✓ Unregenerate men will worship anything but God (including themselves). Paul worships only God.
- When Paul (and we) praise God, two things happen:
 - ✓ *We say what God says about Himself:* “To rejoice in God is to celebrate a relationship with Him.” [Piper] It is to affirm that we affirm the truth about Him and delight in that truth.
 - ✓ *We stimulate others to praise God:* “Though nothing can add to God’s essential glory, yet praise exalts him in the eyes of others. When we praise God, we spread his fame and renown, we display the trophies of his excellency. In this manner the angels glorify him; they are choristers of heaven, and do trumpet forth his praise. Praising God is one of the highest and purest acts of religion. In prayer we act like men; in praise we act like angels.” [Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*.]
- We expect benedictions at the end of books and worship services, not in the middle. This benediction is much like Ephesians 3:14-21 — Paul is so overwhelmed by the richness of God’s nature and the grace of His salvation that he cannot keep himself from praise.
 - ✓ *Our study of theology and Scripture is not just to increase our knowledge;* it is to lead us in worship. All theology should terminate on worship — do we read and study for that purpose and with that result?
 - ✓ Our meditation of salvation should lead us to humble gratitude; we aren’t exalted (humility), God *is* exalted (gratitude). Do we think of the gift of our salvation in such ways? We have an opportunity to do that now at the communion table...

CONCLUSION: Earlier I quoted from John Powell's essay on the Grand Canyon. At the end of the essay He says this —

The glories and the beauties of form, color, and sound unite in the Grand Canyon—forms unrivaled even by the mountains, colors that vie with sunsets, and sounds that span the diapason [notes of the scale] from tempest to tinkling raindrop, from cataract to bubbling fountain. But more: it is a vast district of country. Were it a valley plain it would make a state. It can be seen only in parts from hour to hour and from day to day and from week to week and from month to month. A year scarcely suffices to see it all. It has infinite variety, and no part is ever duplicated. Its colors, though many and complex at any instant, change with the ascending and declining sun; lights and shadows appear and vanish with the passing clouds, and the changing seasons mark their passage in changing colors. You cannot see the Grand Canyon in one view, as if it were a changeless spectacle from which a curtain might be lifted, but to see it you have to toil from month to month through its labyrinths. It is a region more difficult to traverse than the Alps or the Himalayas, but if strength and courage are sufficient for the task, by a year's toil a concept of sublimity can be obtained never again to be equaled on the hither side of Paradise.

Far greater than the sublime Canyon in Arizona is the majestic and transcendent God of Heaven. This One who is above all things has granted salvation to you and me. Let us worship Him.

BENEDICTION: Romans 11:33-36