

Gospel Doxology

Romans 11:33-36 on November 19, 2023

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Please read Romans 11:33-36 before going further in this transcript.

Today is our final sermon from Romans 11. In fact, today marks a rest stop along our journey through Paul's letter to the Roman believers. Chapters 12-16 are still to come, but not until after we've celebrated the season of advent, and then we'll come back to Romans when we kick off the year 2024.¹ Today's sermon is titled "Gospel Doxology." These last four verses of Romans 11 are a crescendo to all that we've been learning about the gospel in these first 11 chapters. Paul pours forth this doxology of worship to God for His merciful salvation! In light of this gospel doxology, we'll be pausing part-way through the message today for a time of sharing some of our own personal gospel testimonies. Psalm 40:9-10 says, "I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, LORD, as you know. 10 I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help. I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly." So in a little while here, we'll pass some microphones around the sanctuary and ask a few of you to share how you came to saving faith in Jesus. And we're hoping that a number of us can share, for just a minute or two, how our salvation is making a difference in our daily lives. *(For those who are reading the transcript, consider sharing your gospel testimony with someone you know and possibly asking them to share theirs with you.)*

We'll ask you to share something like this:

- 1) First, please share your name.
- 2) Then, for 1-2 minutes please share:
 - a. How you came to saving faith in Jesus.
 - b. How your faith is making a difference in your life.

Today we're going to honor God, and give Him the praise, for how the gospel is at work in our lives. So please be thinking about what you might share with the rest of us as a way to bring God glory.

By Gospel we simply mean "the good news about Jesus." This gospel good news is what we've been learning about in the first 11 chapters of Romans. By Doxology we mean "giving God glory."² We can give God glory by

¹ In chapters 12-16, Paul's letter to the believers in Rome will switch from his more theological focus, to a more immediately practical focus on everyday Christian living. "God's providence at work in his redemptive relationship with all humans brought forth from Paul a doxology of praise and adoration. This doxology, thought by many to have been written by Paul himself, provides an appropriate finale for the theological portion of Romans and an effective transition to the more instructional nature of the chapters that follow." Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 226.

² "a combination of doxa, "glory," and logos, "a speaking." ...a hymn or verse in Christian liturgy glorifying God." <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/doxology>

expressing our wonder and awe at what God has done in our past, and what He's currently doing in the present, and at what He's still yet to do in our future.³ We can also give Him glory just for who He is, as our Creator, Heavenly Father, Redeemer, and King.

Romans 11:33 begins, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" Verse 33 begins a very fitting worship-filled response to all that Paul has been writing. As we learned last week, there are certain mysteries which God chooses to reveal to us, but there are many that He does not. So verse 33 isn't necessarily saying that we can't understand anything at all about God, but rather that there are significant limits to what we can understand. The verses right before verse 33 just got done highlighting God's marvelous mercy for all those who believe: God has arranged all of His gospel plans so that He can have mercy on everyone who puts their trust in Jesus. The gospel is "A Gospel for All Peoples." So Paul's Gospel Doxology follows right on the heels of his teaching about God's mercy. Even more though, his doxology follows on the heels of all that he's written about the gospel in the first 11 chapters.⁴

This week I ran into something in my study that I rarely encounter: multiple Bible commentaries didn't want to give much commentary on verses 33-36. Now, you don't sell Bible Commentaries by not commenting! And yet, many of them seemed hesitant to "spoil the text" with too many cognitive details and factual tidbits. With this in mind, today we're going to focus most of the message on doing an overview of everything Romans has taught us about the gospel. Then, near the end of our service, we'll take a brief look at Paul's doxology in verses 33-36, and conclude by meditating on those words.

All the way back in Romans 1:1 Paul began, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God. Then in verse 16 he goes on, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." Paul then goes on verse by verse, and chapter by chapter, to explain the gospel. Paul begins with how we humans have rejected our Creator since the beginning, and how God has given us over, in our rebellion, to the sinful desires of our hearts. Because of our stubbornness and unrepentance, we're storing up wrath for ourselves for

³ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2314 footnote on Romans 11:33-36.

⁴ The Bible Project has some great summary videos: Part 1, Romans 1-4, is 7:46 min. long https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ej_6dVdJSIU and Part 2, Romans 5-16, is 9:10 min. long <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SVTI4Xa5fY>

the day of God's righteous judgment. God does not show favoritism; He judges every Jew and Gentile equally.

The gospel reveals when our faith is merely outward and physical, rather than inward and from the heart. The people of Israel in particular were committed to attaining their own righteousness, by their own efforts. And despite having so many advantages handed to them, as God's special, chosen people, they stand in need of God's grace just as much as any of us Gentiles. The gospel reveals the pitiful state of humankind: "...There is no one righteous, not even one." (Romans 3:10) "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Apart from Christ, we're all under the power of sin, held captive by it, and by its negative impacts on everything around us, and everything within us. However, this doesn't mean that God has abandoned us. Quite the opposite actually, God has continued to be patient and forbearing with us: "...God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance." (Romans 2:4)

Paul goes into great detail about the stubbornness of the Jewish people, and their history of trying to gain righteousness on their own effort. But all of their efforts to obey God's commands on their own, served to accomplish only one thing, the thing that the law is best at: making us conscious of our sin.⁵ Making us realize just how much we need to be rescued from sin's hold on us. The gospel clearly displays Jesus' offer to share His righteousness with us. "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."⁶ There is no place for boasting.⁷ All along Paul describes God's amazing GRACE, offering all of us, Jews and Gentiles alike, salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

Abraham was justified by faith; he was credited righteousness by believing God, not by working for his own righteousness. The promise to Abraham is guaranteed to all of his offspring, to anyone who shares his same faith.⁸ This justification, this credited righteousness, gives any believing Jew or Gentile a new status, a new family, and a new future.⁹ All of us are born "in Adam" and we inherit his sin nature, but any of us who receive God's free gift, can be "in Christ." "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

⁵ Romans 3:20 and 7:7.

⁶ Romans 3:22.

⁷ Romans 3:27.

⁸ Romans 4:16.

⁹ See chart by the Bible Project: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ej_6dVdJSIU

Even as we die to sin, we are raised to new life; this is illustrated by the gospel practice of water baptism.¹⁰ Every part of us goes under the water, dying to sin and self, and then rising to new life, as instruments of His righteousness.¹¹ We are no longer slaves to sin, although we certainly still wrestle against it.¹² One vital difference in our struggle against sin, is that now, in Christ, we have the power and the weapons we need, to fight against it. Another vital difference is that Jesus has set us free from sin's prison.¹³ "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

Those of us who've been transformed by the gospel now have God's Spirit living within us.¹⁴ We now live according to the Spirit, which enables us to put our misdeeds to death.¹⁵ The Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for us in accordance with God's will.¹⁶ The gospel gives us confidence because "If God is for us, who can be against us." We are more than conquerors. "neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39)

All of these gospel truths led Paul to address the elephant in the room: What about ethnic Israel? Why are there so few Jews in the early church? Did God reject them? His answer is a fervent "by no means!" Paul had great sorrow and unceasing anguish for his fellow Israelites who had not yet believed the gospel.¹⁷ But, "It is not as though God's word had failed...." (Romans 9:6) And so he makes it abundantly clear: God has not rejected His chosen people, Israel. Through the gospel, God will be faithful to fulfill all of His Old Testament promises to Israel. Paul illustrates God's salvation strategy for both Jews and Gentiles, with an olive tree. God is the master gardener:

- > He can cut off the natural branches that don't belong,
- > He can graft in the wild branches that He wants to add in, and
- > He can also allow the natural branches to be grafted back in again.

In the midst of various people's rejection of God, and their hearts being hardened toward him, we encounter God's right to call and to choose as He deems best. The gospel magnifies God's sovereign right to elect a remnant unto salvation, demonstrating that He will not leave the gospel's success up to chance. God faithfully intercedes to ensure that His gospel purposes will not be thwarted. And right in the midst of this doctrine of election, the

¹⁰ Romans 6:4.

¹¹ Romans 6:13.

¹² Romans 6:17-18 and 7:15.

¹³ Romans 7:23.

¹⁴ Romans 8:11.

¹⁵ Romans 8:4,13.

¹⁶ Romans 8:26-27.

¹⁷ Romans 9:2.

gospel also reminds us of our human responsibility to call on the name of the Lord, to repent of our sin and to put our faith in God. “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9) “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:13)

Paul concludes near the end of Romans 11 that God does indeed have a plan for the future salvation of Israel. The ethnic Israelites have not stumbled beyond recovery. Their temporary hardening is serving God’s greater gospel purposes to bring the full number of Gentiles to salvation. One day ethnic Israel will come to its senses. Rather than continuing in unbelief, they will finally return to God in large numbers, by putting their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Messiah. “For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all.” (Romans 11:32)

The doxology of praise that crescendos at the end of Romans 11, is the natural overflow of all that we’ve been learning about the gospel; worship is the only appropriate response! New Testament scholar John Stott says it well: “there can be no doxology without theology” and “there should be no theology without doxology.”¹⁸ All 11 of these chapters, demonstrate God’s sovereign planning, and His loving concern to bring people to Himself through the gospel. This is all for His glory, which is why Paul responds by pouring forth his praise in Romans 11:33-36: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 34 “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” 35 “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” 36 For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

(Before we take a closer look at these verses, let’s take some time to pass around the microphones, and share our Gospel Testimonies with one another.)

Now let’s take just a brief look at Romans 11:33-36. Paul’s Gospel Doxology calls us to glorify God for three reasons:

1. God’s ways are beyond our comprehension. Paul begins his gospel doxology in Romans 11:33, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! God’s ways are “deep,” “unsearchable,” and “beyond tracing out.” The *ESV* declares: “how inscrutable his ways!” meaning that they are mysterious and impenetrable. And yet, we often find ourselves trying to search them out, trying to trace out God’s path like it’s some simple deer

¹⁸ Romans, 311–12. Cited in Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995).

trail in the woods. It's a little ridiculous if you think about it, trying to understand God's mysterious ways.^{19 20} We should give Him glory because "God's ways are beyond our comprehension."

Paul's Gospel Doxology also calls us to glorify God because...

2. God has no counselors, and He needs none. Romans 11:34 asks, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" These questions are echoed back in Isaiah 40:13-14, "Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor? 14 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?" God doesn't need our advice.²¹ There's no information that we can add to His knowledge base, and there's no question that we can ask Him, which will stump Him or exceed His limitless wisdom and knowledge.²² We should give Him glory because "God has no counselors, and He needs none."

Paul's Gospel Doxology also calls us to glorify God because...

3. God is the source, means, and goal of all things.²³ Romans 11:35-36 concludes, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?"²⁴ For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."²⁵ God set everything in motion by His own creative command, and He keeps everything in motion by His own sustaining power. This universe did not create itself, nor did God need to borrow materials or get blueprints from anyone in order to make it. From His own

¹⁹ New Testament scholar Andrew David Naselli lists four implications of God being beyond our comprehension: 1. We can't understand everything. 2. God isn't obligated to explain everything. 3. We should humbly believe and cherish the mysteries God has revealed. 4. We should give God glory for what He's explained to us, and for what He's not explained. Andrew David Naselli, *Romans*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2022, p. 150.

²⁰ Colossians 2:2-3 says, "My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." So rather than trying to understand all of the mysteries of God, our efforts are better spent prayerfully pursuing a better understanding of Christ and His gospel. God has revealed His ultimate mystery to humankind, and that mystery is Christ. In Him, is hidden all that we need to know, all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Also consider 2 Peter 1:3.

²¹ See Andrew David Naselli, *Romans*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2022, p. 150.

²² God never refers us to someone else because we've come to Him with something beyond His ability or skillset. His counsel is ultimate and unlimited. Now that doesn't mean that He always tells us everything that we want to know, but it does mean that He will never fail for lack of understanding something.

²³ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2315 footnote on Romans 11:36.

²⁴ This echoes Job 41:11, "Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me." "no one can place God in his or her debt." Andrew David Naselli, *Romans*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2022, p. 149.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 8:6 says, "yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." Colossians 1:15-17 teaches us that, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

unlimited resources, God made everything that we see, and everything that we can't see; He sustains this universe by keeping His foot on the gas pedal in order to keep everything moving along. God's got the whole world in His hands. There is no one else who can even compare with His ultimate supremacy. In the words of Exodus 8:10, "...there is no one like the LORD our God."²⁶ "God is the source, the means, and the goal of all things."²⁷ It's all from Him and through Him, and it's all for Him, for His glory and His glory alone.

We began today's message by doing an overview of what the first 11 chapters of Romans taught us about the gospel. Verses 33-36 are Paul's worship-filled response to God's awe-inspiring gospel work in our world. There's value in letting today's passage speak for itself, in simply meditating on these verses rather than thrusting them under a microscope for exhaustive analysis.²⁸ With this in mind, I'd like to invite our choir up to conclude today's service with a special closing song. This song comes right out of today's text, and it's intended to help us meditate and reflect on the words themselves. *(Those who are reading the sermon transcript may want to slowly read verses 33-36 out loud 2-3 times in a row and just let them soak in as you meditate on their significance.)*

²⁶ See also Exodus 9:14; Psalm 86:8-13; Isaiah 46:8-10; and Jeremiah 10:6-7.

²⁷ One time when Paul was in Athens, he had an opportunity to explain the living God to a group of Greek philosophers. In Acts 17:24-28 he says, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'" This saying at the end of verse 28 is from the Cretan philosopher Epimenides. The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011). This likely happened on a hill in Rome called the Areopagus, at a meeting with the same name. "eh ree AA puh guhs" https://www.google.com/search?q=pronounce+areopagus&sca_esv=

²⁸ New Testament scholar Robert Mounce says it well, "Its power is felt more in hearing it read and reflecting upon its truth than in comments that must be made regarding its specific meaning at various points." Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 226–227