



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Romans 11:33-36

"The Leading Principle of

All Divine Truth"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The general theme of our series of messages has been, "The Apostle Paul and the Purpose of the Ages" or "What is God Doing Now?" This is the seventh in the series of seven messages on that theme and our subject for the message today is, "The Leading Principle of All Divine Truth." I hope you have your Bibles before you and I hope you'll turn them to Romans chapter 11 verse 33 through verse 36 because you'll surely get a great deal more out of the message if you have the Scriptures before.

The Leading Principle of All Divine Truth: At this point in Romans chapter 11 Paul seems to be caught up in the spirit of Wesley's "Love Divine" with its lost and its wonder love and praise. What can we say when the apostle is so overcome? And as far as, understanding what Paul has been saying is concerned Rittle is right in saying, "We have learned Paul's meaning only when we can join in this inscription of praise, the marvelous truth of verse 32 that God in his determined counsel and infinite wisdom has purposed to exercise mercy to all without distinction as forced from the beloved apostles heart this explanation of astonished wonder." It is as Gifford so aptly says, "A noble conclusion to the great argument of the epistle it's striking that the wrath that Paul said in chapter one

was revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men has merged now into the divine mercy that God has extended to all the nations on the earth.

The apostle of course has had primarily upon his mind God's dealings with Israel and the Gentiles, and the flow of redemptive history from the Fall on to the Second Advent. In this reflection upon it, and in his exposition of it, however, it has emerged quite clearly a general and universal truth, namely the sovereignty of the infinite God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps we should say the truth of the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ who is Sovereign, to be sure to stress the divine person and not simply a truth about him.

At any rate, the God who is infinite in his knowledge, wisdom, purpose, mercy and grace has been before the reader. And the climax has reached in the doxology of Romans 11 verse 33 through verse 36. The doxology underlines this leading principle of all divine truth namely the God who is sovereign. In fact, there are few passages in the word of God that declare as forcibly the conviction that God is all in human salvation while man is only a helpless beneficiary of divine love and grace. This truth stands out in the full verses and confirms the appropriateness of the great titles given to our Sovereign God such as, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the One who is, who was and is to come and then that marvelous title the Alpha and the Omega.

The prophets and the apostles alike proclaim the blessed but humbling message; salvation is of the Lord, Jonah chapter 2 and verse 9.

We look now at verse 33 through verse 35 where the apostle writes about the profundity and the inscrutability of the divine purposes and verse 33 begins with a marvelous exclamation, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out." The apostle marvels at the course of the divine elective purpose as it is seen in the ages of salvation history, the three terms, riches, wisdom and knowledge, impress him. What does that connote? Riches is the broadest of them and refers to God's unlimited resources and in

this context particularly his mercy for that's what he's been speaking about primarily. "Wisdom is the middle excellence of God in its highest and fullest sense." One lexicographer has said. And perhaps we may add that it often represents the means employed in the use of knowledge. God's wisdom is the infinitely perfect use of his complete knowledge.

Knowledge particularly as meant by the word used here in this context refers to the infinite store of truth of all types in the mind of God. In this context, especially, it refers to the knowledge from which has come God's purposes. Is it necessary to note that Paul finds these qualities, infinite knowledge, infinite wisdom and the infinite riches of mercy in God? Where else could they be found?

The following line how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways passed finding out, heightens the picture. His judgments are the purposes of God the determination that flow from his infinite knowledge and wisdom, while his ways are his methods or procedures in accomplishing his intentions. The apostle states that his judgments are unsearchable beyond the comprehension of man the creature and that his ways are beyond the reach of the scientific method. The adjective "passed finding out" is derived from a Greek verb, that means to trace out by tracking or tracks. Finite human methods of inquiry terminated the boarder of infinity. At this check-point, Charlie, revelation alone provides light.

The apostle goes on to explain inverse 34 and verse 35. The "for" of verse 34 introduces the explanation of this state of things, infinite knowledge, infinite wisdom and infinite riches of mercy necessarily lead to human astonishment. The words of scripture justify the statements of verse 33, two quotations the first from Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 13 and the second from Job chapter 41 and verse 11 as cited by Paul to show that God's knowledge, wisdom, riches of mercy are beyond human rich. The scriptural texts are in the form of questions and the support the preceding observations in reverse order. The

opening line of verse 34: "For who hath known the mind of the Lord?" refers to the knowledge of God the last of the astonishing infinities of the preceding verse.

In the context of Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 13 the prophet stands in the midst of the announcement of the coming redemption of the people by the exalted person of the Lord God. Sometime take a look at Isaiah 40 verse 1 through verse 11. The questions that follow seek to give the people in exile the sense of his greatness as Creator in verses 12 through 14 and Governor in verses 15 through 17. In the background of the question is the popular current idolatry into which the people had fallen and toward which they were being influenced. And the prophet is contrasting the common falsehoods with the truth concerning Jehovah the true God. The question that Paul has cited stresses Jehovah's infinite knowledge as displayed in his creative work. He needed no philosopher to inform him regarding reality.

The second line of verse 34 as in Isaiah's prophecy has to do with wisdom. He needed no teacher or engineer in physical sciences to instruct him in the science of creation. All the earth's sciences reposed in his mind imperfection. The carnal mind of man often baffled by the divine works tends to affirm that which surpasses our reason is impossible but we must remember that incomparable power and mind are inscrutable. Let us submit our weakness, rashness, and occasional insolence to his unsearchable counsel in becoming humility all the reason or understanding that we have, Calvin reminds us is mere darkness 'til we have been enlightened by Jesus Christ. The depth of his riches of mercy finds emphasis in verse 35 in the citation from Job 41 and verse 11: "Or who hath first given to him and it shall be recompensed to him again?" No one has so given to God that his benefits may be regarded as requital for that giving. It is not that we first give to him and then he gives us in response. All his gifts are in free grace and overflowing generosity. He as Paul has said, "Is rich unto all who call upon him." Chapter 10 and verse 12, and they call upon him not to give him something but to receive what they cannot earn his marvelous salvation.

No doubt the apostle had Israel in mind here for the root of the error of his generation was the self-righteous notion of earning God's blessing and favor by previous merit. The divine activity is not determined and conditioned by human calculation and action. The creature can do nothing to put God under obligation to him. Everything Paul has been teaching denies this. Justification by the merit of Christ in grace, sanctification by the Holy Spirit and not by the power of human free will, and divine election and calling according to the divine purpose and not by the foreknowledge of faith through human free will.

Now, secondly, the apostle turns in the last verse to the independent sovereignty of God and first he mentions the source. He says, "For of him and through him and to him are all things to whom be glory forever, amen." The independent sovereignty of God the "for" or because as the original text has it, introduces the reason why man cannot lay God unto obligation to him. God himself is the source, the mediator, and the goal of all things. How can he be anyone's debtor? He is the first cause of everything; the agent who works all and all and all things has him as their final cause. The whole process of salvation, even including its negative aspects of disobedience, wrath, and retribution is due to God initiative who performs his purposes through the Son and the Spirit. Then Paul says not only of him are all things but through him, and this expression refers to the fact that he is the mediator of all things. Through him marks out the Lord God as the one through whom all things reach their conclusion and it's inclusive of his providential ordering, his care, his preservation of them.

And finally, he says unto him, the goal. The entire redemptive process has as it's goal the Lord God and the publication of his excellences as the final flaws indicates. These three phrases of him, and through him, and to him, express most forcibly the independent sovereignty of God over this created universe and it's intelligences and creatures.

One might turn to the book of Daniel chapter 2 and verse 21 and chapter 4 verse 35 for confirmation of this from the Old Testament. One also might ask at this point what is independent sovereignty? There's great confusion today over the meaning of sovereignty, almost all Christians say they believe in the sovereignty of God but few are able to define the term. This is not the place to settle the matter in a brief message like this but perhaps a few comments will clarify.

Sovereignty is a comprehensive term. It includes three elements, supremacy, independence and optional power. A sovereign is supreme in his dominions, a sovereign has the power of independent action in both external and internal relations, and finally a sovereign has optional power that is the power to act or not in a given instance. He has the power of free alternative action. So when we speak about the sovereignty of God we are saying that that denotes God's supremacy, his independence and his optional power in his kingdom, the kingdom of God. It is when the specifics of this power are discussed that men and surprisingly even Christian men fall into disagreement and disputes. If God is sovereign then he must be sovereign in election, regeneration, and salvation. And if he is sovereign in these matters then he must have the optional power of electing or passing by a sinner. If God has no alternative in regard to election, regeneration and pardon then what sovereignty has he in the salvation of a sinner? We can only say none. Let the offense of the doctrine fall where it may God has decided the matter and he has written it in both Testaments of the word of God.

I emphasize this because so often today people will not submit their thinking to the word of God in the final analysis what does the scripture say that settles such questions as this or else we shouldn't even speak about what the scripture say about the Lord God and his Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to what God has said concerning the matter both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. To Moses God said, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and show compassion on whom I will show compassion." Exodus chapter 33, verse 19,

look it up and underline it. And Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, reaffirm the sentiment and cited the text in this same epistle in Romans chapter 9 and verse 15, just a couple of chapters before our chapter and he added his own imprimatur and this concluding interpretive comment in chapter 9 and verse 18 when he said, "Therefore hath he have mercy on whom he will have mercy on whom he will he hardeneth." The gospel of sovereign grace a doctrine pervading the word of God has always been the object of the world's contempt for the world is a world of self-satisfied enemies of God, confident of self-justification. Nevertheless, the scriptures extol the grace of a God who sovereignly saves those who acknowledge their need and rest in sovereign grace.

Let me summarize in a series of propositions, God's sovereign grace. First, the scripture say God loves in sovereign grace. Paul describes the Thessalonians as, "Brethren beloved of the Lord." And in the context spoke of their divined election, II Thessalonians and chapter 2 and verse 13. And second, God elects sinners in sovereign grace. Paul added that the Thessalonians were loved "Because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation." II Thessalonians chapter 2 and verse 13, look also at I Thessalonians chapter 1 and verse 4.

And thirdly, God calls in sovereign grace. And he calls in sovereign effectual grace, making the unwilling willing, as the apostle notes in Galatians 1:6 saying to the Galatians that God called you by the grace of Christ. Calling in the apostle Paul is always used in the sense of effectual calling. That's Galatians 1:6.

And fourth, God justifies in sovereign grace. In one of his greatest passages, Paul writes that the Romans were justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, Romans 3:24.

We could go on and on but we will pass by his adopting and sanctifying grace to mention finally, that God perseveres in sovereign grace, securing the eternal salvation of all his adopted family. Listen to Jesus Christ's words, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and I give unto eternal life and they shall never perish."

John 10:27-28. All his sheep shall enjoy a safe arrival in the presence of the Lord. This is part of what is meant by for of him, and through him, and to him, are all things.

And Paul concludes verse 36 with a reference to the ineffable glory of God. To him be glory unto the ages or forever. Notice its reference. It's not wonder then that the apostle concludes on the note of the ineffable glory of God. All events are full of God and that is no dry theological statement, it's a call to worship and that Paul does with, to him to the glory forever. Amen.

Gifford wrote, "As the rivers return again to the place where they came, they all come from the sea, they all run into the sea again so all our store as it issued at first from the fountain of his grace so shall it fall at last into the ocean of his glory."

Another commentator puts it this way, "The by grace alone and the by faith alone and of these eleven chapters can only issue in this to God alone be the glory." What it means to give glory to God and how far removed this is from mere pious ejaculation so characteristic of so much evangelicalism today will appear in chapters twelve through sixteen of this marvelous epistle. For the one who glorifies God is the one who gives his body a living sacrifice to serve him as the apostle exhorts us in these concluding chapters of the epistle.

The essence of the glory of God may be defined as all the divine perfections in full display, this we see most fully and clearly in the person at work in our Lord Jesus Christ for God has given the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, II Corinthians chapter 4 verse 6. And the endlessness of ineffable glory of God is stated by Paul, he says, "To him be glory forever." The endlessness of the manifested glory of God is a requirement of the endlessness of his eternal being when time no longer exists as it does now. The manifestation of the excellences of God's being shall be as fresh and striking as they were when we first came to know him.

Let me conclude with a few words. Let us not forget the application of these truths to God's beloved Israel, the people of whom the mad prophet Balaam prophesied,

"For from the top of the rocks I see him and from the hills I behold him, lo the people shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his." That, Balaam said by divine inspiration.

The God who preserves his saints today shall preserve Israel as a nation for her future destiny of salvation. It is true David Barron, a Christian Jew, wrote, "That the testimony which Israel bears while in a condition of unbelief is for the most part, though not holy, passive, but still it is most valuable." How thankful for instance, we should be that in these days when even theological professors, Cooley assert that it is doubtful whether Abraham was an actual personality that there is a whole nation, who, whenever they say, "Abraham, say Avraham Avinu, Abraham our Father." And when some who condescend to admit the existence of Moses as a historical personality confidently declare that he certainly had very little to nothing to do with the giving of the law. That to this day there is a whole people scattered through the earth who whenever they name the name of Moses say, "Moshe Rabinu, Moses our teacher." As if in solemn protest against those wild unreasonable and unjustifiable theories which are pawned off in the name of criticism so the Christian Jew.

Israel the nation it is true is a monument of the judgment of God but they are also a monument of God's word and of his faithfulness to its doctrine of sovereign grace. The doxology is a most appropriate conclusion to the doctrinal section of Romans, that wonderful epistle which probably more clearly than any other part of the word of God presents and defends the sound divine plan of salvation by grace, the doctrine upon which the faithful in all ages have rested their hopes of heaven and the presence of God. Its leading principle is that of the Bible itself namely, that of a sovereign God the source of all good elects, regenerates and pardons fallen men who whom there is neither merit nor ability to turn to him and finally in that same sovereign grace brings his own to

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eternal glory, we say with the apostle Paul, "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things to whom be glory forever. Amen.

[Prayer] May God in his marvelous grace cause you to see yourself as you are a sinner before the Lord God under divine wrath and condemnation and may you flee to him who is the source of saving grace. That's our prayer for you today.

[Message] Next week, we begin the first of a series of messages with the title "Once Saved Always Saved" or "The Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints." I hope you'll be listening then.