

Romans 11:33-36 (New Living Translation)

³³Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand God's decisions and God's ways!

³⁴For who can know the LORD's thoughts?

Who knows enough to give the LORD advice?

**³⁵And who has given the LORD so much
that the LORD needs to pay it back?**

³⁶For everything comes from God and exists by God's power and is intended for God's glory. All glory to the Creator forever! Amen.

I've been on Facebook now for 13 years. I'm not looking for applause or booing; there have been and are some really great things about it and there have been and are some very ugly things about it. But one thing I love is when these Memories pictures pop up on the timeline. When I open up Facebook, my profile will have a picture that I or someone else posted on the same date during a different year. Often times the pictures are of my children when they were little little. So the first thing I do is call my wife over and we ooo and aww for a bit, recalling fondly a time when they couldn't form words other than ma-ma or da-da, a time before they couldn't stop calling out "Mooooooom!" or "Daaaaaaad!" And we decide that still love them, and that we made the right decision to not have more children. But I also then begin thinking about what happened shortly thereafter, as they did learn how to speak in coherent sentences, as they became verbally inquisitive, as their curiosity ramped up to 100, and about how our relative peace that was once beautifully broken by crying was now beautifully broken by the constant question, "Why?"...and continued crying.

As parents, we got so tired of hearing the question, much less trying to answer the question. I'm probably not alone in this. What I hope though, is that we have not been (too) guilty of quashing that questioning nature. Because that questioning nature is how they learn, it's how we learn, it's how we'll continue to learn, it's how we'll always learn. Some of our questions are asked out loud, and we wait for an answer. And some of our questions are asked internally, and we observe, we encounter, we listen, we try and fail, we try and succeed, we cry out to God, we learn what the voice of God sounds like and what the hand of God looks like in response to those questions. The "why" never stops. Nor should it, because we can never know all that there is to know, and we can especially never know the heights and depths, the breadth and width of the nature, the thoughts, the will, the riches, the wisdom and the knowledge of God.

We can't fully understand or grasp God. It's just not possible. Truly, we can only fathom pieces and parts of God. And even that differs from person to person. Some will experience truth at different ages and within different contexts, from different positions and perspectives, with different levels of conviction and acceptance. But still, this is just a fraction of the fullness of God. Love, all by itself, is too vast for us to wrap our heads around and can hardly be contained by our hearts. Which is why, I think, it should spill out from us through heart, soul, mind and strength. Who among us though, has figured out how to love that way, the way God calls us to love, not just one another, but ourselves and our enemies as well?

"Have you ever come across anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out." We are far too small and broken. But we can still know God. In other words, we can still be in relationship with God through Christ. In other words, the great big love of God through Christ can mend our brokenness, can overwhelm the brokenness so that instead of broken pieces we can have a beautiful peace.

It all sounds incredible, but there are so many pieces to put back together. It all sounds incredible, but there are so many pieces missing. It all sounds incredible, but so much gets in the way. It all sounds incredible, but we still get in the way. *Because* we have such a hard time understanding God decision and God's ways, and *because* we so often think we *do*, we struggle so hard to embrace the *mystery* of God and God's Word.

Here the apostle Paul is addressing a group of Gentiles, non-Jews who have come to faith through the Good News of Jesus Christ. And the Good News of Jesus Christ, the grace that come through faith, is available to them in part because the original people of God, Israel, has rejected God...again. They rejected the Good News, they rejected Christ, and Scripture says their hearts were hardened. There's also a third group of folks who are Jews who *did* accept Christ as Lord and Savior – Paul is among them. And lest the Gentiles begin to feel as though they are better than the Jews, and lest the Jewish Christians feel as though there is no place for Gentiles in the kingdom, and lest Israel hear that their repeated rejection of Christ has led to God rejecting them, Paul feels compelled to clear the air. Because each of these groups, whether they've been feasting on the Scriptures for hundreds of years, or they've just recently been exposed to it and are gulping it down without chewing, they probably feel as though they have a bead on exactly what God means and exactly for whom God intends it. So instead of asking questions and seeking to better understand the will of God, they might be tempted to say, "No need. We've already got it," and then begin to *play* God.

The *risk* is adding a mountain of confusion to the already enormous mystery of God by claiming they've solved it.

Theologian Grant Osborne writes: “The answer is quite clear—no one has known the mind of the Lord, and no one has been [God’s] counselor. God is indeed inscrutable, and human beings can only watch in awe as [God] performs [God’s] will. The point is that God’s knowledge of salvation history is absolute while ours is finite, so none of us can be [God’s] counselor. We all depend on [God’s] knowledge and [God’s] will, so we live lives of Christ-dependency (the true meaning of faith).”

In the simplest terms, there are those in each of the three groups of believers who think they have God figured out. They think they know God’s will. They think they know how God works. They think they know who God loves and who truly loves God (THEM!). And they think God’s Word is open and shut. Done and done. So Paul says, “Whoa!” Osborne says, “No one can comprehend the vastness of who God is.” Not even Paul.

Just like the cycle of the Israelites making covenant and breaking covenant – “I will be your God and you will be My people” – this is a cycle that has continued for thousands of years all the way up to today. Different groups of believers who think they have God figured out, who think they know God’s will, who think they know how God works, who think they know who God love and who truly loves God (THEM!), and think God’s Word is open and shut. Done and done. Whoa!

Pastor and scholar Ben Witherington had this to say on the matter: *I grew up in a neighborhood in High Point, North Carolina that was substantially Jewish. My closest neighborhood friends with whom I laughed and cried and played and stayed were Jews. I played basketball with them, attended bas-mitzvoth, and broke my arm in their yard, showing off for Sheryl and Dana, my closest Jewish friends. Even though my family moved to another part of town, Sheryl and I continued to be friends and to go through school together. I now lived closer to the synagogue and would play basketball with Harvey and Larry after Hebrew school, and I enjoyed going to functions there. There came a day when Sheryl approached me at school about going to a dance. You could tell she felt a little awkward about asking me, but we had been friends a long time. She wanted to go to the dance at the Country Club, and her regular date had stopped seeing her. She asked if I would take her. I of course said yes, but there was a cloud over this matter. This was the 1960s, and country clubs with an all, or almost all, W.A.S.P. membership did not permit any Jews to attend functions, much less be members. Undaunted, Sheryl and I decided to go and try to have a good time, which we managed to do. It taught me a lesson in life, namely to try to see the world from the point of view of those who faced far more discrimination than I had ever known.*

Prejudice in any age is an ugly sin, and Paul deals with just such prejudice... His largely Gentile audience seems to follow the normal Roman understanding of Jews, namely that Jews are an inferior race and, more to the point, a religiously inferior race. The great danger after the edict of Claudius in a.d. 49 was that Gentile Christians in Rome would believe that God had quite rightly rejected [God’s] first chosen people for people like themselves. So Paul must offer a tour-de-force argument to counter such prejudice, which is combined in a deadly amalgam with bad theology. The truth is that such battles have to be fought and won in every generation of human history because humanity is still a fallen lot.

Friends, we don’t get it all. We don’t get a lot of it. How can we? When we think we have it all figured out, when we think we fully understand the whole of the word of God, or even parts of it completely, we make ourselves unavailable to God working the Word out through us.

Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthian church, “Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much.”

Theologian Sarah Heaner Lancaster writes: “We should not think *ourselves* wiser when we are regarding what we think we know God will do, and we should certainly never use what we think we know to support Christian superiority. In our time, sharing Paul’s conviction about God’s faithfulness to us in our own social locations ought to include openness to how God may work in ways we do not expect and that may not be identical across all groups in order to bring all to fullness of life. God does not treat mercy sparingly the way that human beings do.”

Jesus said in Matthew’s Gospel (10:39): “If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it.”

If our attachment to our earthly comforts and security, to what is familiar and convenient, is greater to us than our love and trust in and faith in a God who we believe Created the world, who we believe loves us with a love larger than the cosmos, who we believe promises never to leave or forsake us, who we believe has a desire for us to experience life and life to the full; if we refuse to carry our burdens, our questions, our doubts, our discomfort and insecurity, our fears and failures in pursuit of truth and wholeness and the will of God; if we hold onto what we think we know and make no room for more God or more good or further explanation or greater riches and wisdom and knowledge, then we are giving greater glory to our own riches and wisdom and knowledge apart from the vastness of God.

We have to set aside so much of ourselves in order to be fully available to God accomplishing what God wants to accomplish, and we have to lose our lives so that we can find the life God intends for us. Who knows exactly what that looks like? Who knows exactly what that feels like? Who knows exactly how to do that? Who understands it all? It takes a strength we don't possess on our own and a willingness that requires surrender.

It requires letting God, the God who put us together in the first place, find our fault lines and take the pieces of us that have been crafted in the image of love, and reform them into a vessel that is open to receive that same love and spill it out into all the world.

Lancaster says: "For many, God's generosity to others is troubling. It violates our sensibilities to imagine that God could treat as mercifully as God treats us those who have caused *us* harm or *inconvenienced* us. Part of growing into the mind of Christ entails increasing recognition that God's love is larger than our is, and then asking for grace for our love to become a larger reflection of God's. The grandness of God exceeds anything that we may know, and we are not in a position to understand the mind of God or the ways God achieves God's purposes."

Israel (the Jews), the people of God, felt the same about the Gentiles as some Christians feel about the LGBTQ+ community and refugees and people of different ethnicities and faiths and socioeconomic situations and different political and theological and ideological perspectives. **God says we are all, the Jews, the Gentiles, the people of God, we are all to receive the kingdom in its fullness.** And if we ask to be a reflection of God's love, of Christ's love, but we don't allow for the possibility that this face, this love might be bigger or different than what we're comfortable with, or because we've only seen it extend so far with regards to our own hopes and desires of God, then whose face are we truly reflecting. It might be our own. But because we claim Christ, our reflection gets attached to the image of God and Christ in the eyes of those who so desperately need to experience this love. I don't know how it works, but love does.

Sometimes we don't understand the "why" of things because they are just unfamiliar and difficult to comprehend. Other times, we don't understand the "why" of things because we don't allow ourselves to comprehend.

Listen, I don't even understand 7th grade math. So maybe understanding God isn't what we're supposed to be trying to do; after all, God is so much bigger, higher, deeper, wider than anything we can imagine. Maybe instead we should work to believe that God understands us, that only God truly understands us because God made each of us uniquely in the image of God. Maybe understanding God is out of reach, but working to love like God has to help us get closer. Maybe we need to understand that we may never understand God, but we can work to understand each other in all of our beautiful brokenness.

Our Westminster Catechism says, God created all of humanity to "glorify the Lord and to enjoy the Lord forever."

Why?

Because "everything comes *from* God; everything happens *through* God; everything ends up *in* God. Always glory. Always praise. Amen."