

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	42		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 11:33-36		
Date:	July 22, 2018 (a.m.)		

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST (Part I)

While I was a student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, my wife and I frequently would make the long drive to Tenth Presbyterian Church to hear the late James Montgomery Boice preach. He was then preaching through the epistle to the Romans. Next to S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., no one has influenced me more than James Boice, who has to be considered one of the greatest Bible expositors of all time. His handling of our text is one of the best that I have encountered. He notes at the beginning that, “No people ever rise higher than their idea of God. Conversely, a loss of the sense of God’s high and awesome character always involves a loss of a people’s moral values and even what we commonly call ‘humanity.’ We are startled by the utter disregard for human life that has overtaken large segments of the United States. But what do we expect to see when a country like ours openly turns its back on God? We deplore the breakdown of moral standards in the church, even among its most visible leaders. But what do we think should happen when we have focused our worship services on ourselves and our own, often trivial, needs rather than on God?”¹

- I. ***THE APOSTLE’S DECLARATION OF ADORATION.*** This enraptured expression of praise stems from the grand and comprehensive nature of God’s sovereign purposes displayed in Biblical history. Barclay declared: “Paul never wrote a more characteristic passage than this. Here theology turns to poetry. Here the seeking of the mind turns to the adoration of the heart. In the end all must pass out in a mystery that man cannot now understand but at whose heart is love. If a man can say that all things come from God, that all things have their being through him, and that all things end in him, what more is left to say? There is a certain paradox in the human situation. God gave man a mind, and it is man’s duty to use that mind to think to the very limit of human thought. But it is also true that there are times when that limit is reached and all that is left is to accept and to adore. *‘How could I praise, If such as I might understand?’* Paul had battled with a heartbreaking problem with every resource which his great mind possessed. He does not say that he has solved it, as one might neatly solve a geometrical problem; but he does say that, having done his best, he is content to leave it to the love and power of God. At many times in life there is nothing left but to say: ‘I cannot grasp thy mind, but with my whole heart I trust thy love. Thy will be done!’”² Paul’s adoring wonder contemplates *three* of God’s attributes: (1) grace and goodness; (2) wisdom; (3) omniscience and knowledge. H. P. Liddon notes that of the three attributes, *ploutas* (expressing the exhaustlessness of God’s goodness) points to the superabundant wealth of the Divine resources as shown especially in God’s work of salvation.³ On this theme Stott writes: “Paul has already written of God’s wealth: ‘the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience’ (2:4), ‘the riches of his

glory' (9:23) and the riches which the Lord Jesus bestows indiscriminately on all who call on him (10:12). Elsewhere he describes God as 'rich in mercy' and refers to Christ's inexhaustible riches. The dominant thought is that salvation is a gift from God's riches and that it immensely enriches those to whom it is given. Then there is God's wisdom, which is hidden in Christ, was displayed on the cross (though it appears to human beings to be folly), and is unfolded in his saving purpose. Thus if the wisdom of God planned salvation, the wealth of God bestows it. Moreover, God's wealth and wisdom are not only deep; they are actually unfathomable (33b). His decisions are unsearchable, and his ways inscrutable. This is the New Testament equivalent of Isaiah 55:8f, where God declares his thoughts to be higher than our thoughts, and his ways than our ways. But of course! How could finite and fallen creatures like us ever imagine that we could penetrate into the infinite mind of God? His mind (what he thinks) and his activity (what he does) are altogether beyond us."⁴

II. THE STRUCTURE OF PAUL'S THOUGHT. (1) Paul begins by declaring God's riches, wisdom and knowledge and the inscrutability of his plans. Then (2) he poses three rhetorical questions to drive home the greatness and the mystery of God. Next (3) he ascribes to God mastery over history as its source, means and destination. Finally (4), he ascribes eternal glory to God. Under the impulse of the Spirit of God Paul has given us one of his most inspiring utterances. How comforting to know that the God of the universe is such a Being as this. God is all-knowing, all-powerful *and* merciful. But we ask, what has stirred Paul to write in this way about God? The answer, clearly, must be found in the context of the doxology. Here three matters stand out. One is the triumph of God's mercy over his wrath at the disobedience of Jew and Gentile. This is confirmed by his opening words in the next section, 'I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the *mercies* of God . . .' God is rich in kindness, patience and longsuffering (see on 2:4). Each Jew and Gentile may be disobedient and rightly an object of divine wrath, yet God's mercy, shown in Christ crucified and risen, and in the preaching of the gospel, will prevail. The need for that mercy and its application was explained in earlier passages, chapters 3-8 in particular. Second, Paul himself is an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and from the tribe of Benjamin (v. 1). He loves his people and would be prepared to relinquish his own salvation for the sake of his fellow-Jews (9:1-3). More importantly, he knows that God is committed by his word of promise through the patriarchs to the nation Israel (see on 9:6, 9). God's election and calling to Israel is irrevocable. Rejection of Christ by part of Israel was heartbreaking for Paul. Yet he grasped that a better thing lay ahead – ultimately, their 'acceptance' of Christ. Assured of God's fidelity to his Word and to his people, Paul bursts into this paean of praise. Third, Paul discerns the loving purposes encompassing Adam's race, overturning his Sin which has brought the scourge of death to all people. In Christ, Jews and Gentiles, though sinners, find saving grace in the gospel. The apostle envisages a great family of Jews and Gentiles gathered in the presence of their king, the Messiah Jesus."⁵ (to be continued)

ENDNOTES

¹J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary* III (Baker, 1993), p. 1412.

²W. Barclay, *Romans: The Daily Study Bible* (St. Andrews Press, 1975), p. 155.

³H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Zondervan, 1961), p. 222.

⁴J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994), p. 310.

⁵This summary is taken from Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness* (Christian Focus, 2003), p. 268.