

Praise amidst Unresolved Circumstances

Romans 11:33-36

We all face unresolved issues in our lives. It's pretty rare when we're able to say, "You know, there's really nothing in my life that's troubling me right now." The vast majority of the time, if we were honest, we'd have to say, "I've got an unresolved relationship that I just can't make right." Or, "I've got a close friend who is running from God, and it looks like he's headed for disaster." Or, "I'm dealing with medical issues that are pretty scary." Chances are that you can think of such unresolved situations in your life right now.

Many times our response to these situations tends to drift toward one of two extremes. On one extreme we can be paralyzed by anxiety and fear. Our fears and anxieties are supposed to drive us to prayer and trust in God. That's what Paul advocates in Philippians 4:6 when he wrote, "Be anxious for nothing. . . pray about everything." But many times our fears and anxieties paralyze us. We get "stuck" and feel like we can't really live again until our situation is resolved.

The other extreme is to get busy trying to take control of our circumstances. There are certainly times when we need to take action. The Scriptures are full of commands that suggest we not be passive and just wait for things to change. For example, when there are conflicts with others we're told to leave worship, go find the person who has something against us, and take steps to resolve the conflict. In many situations we're supposed to take action. But that's different from being a controlling (or manipulative) person who isn't being led by the Holy Spirit.

This morning's passage suggests something very strategic you and I can do in the midst of troubling, unresolved situations. It suggests something that can give perspective both to the anxious and to the controlling person. In Romans 11:33-36 Paul suggests that in the midst of unresolved circumstances we should ***Give praise to God***.

Depending on your experience with worshiping/praising God, the idea of giving praise to God may or may not seem significant. There's a reason why "Praise the Lord" is the most frequent command in the Bible (the second, I think, is "Do not fear."). Praise isn't optional; praise should be a core commitment for God's people. I hope that as we work our way through this passage we'll see why that is the case.

This fall we've been working our way through Romans 9 through 11. In these chapters Paul wrestles with the fact that relatively few of Paul's fellow Jews in the first century had come to faith in Christ. This was one of the great unresolved issues in Paul's life. He writes at the beginning of Romans 9 that he lived with "great sorrow and unceasing grief." He prayed and he shared Christ, but the fact of the matter was that very few of his fellow Jews believed. Their unbelief was the great unresolved issue in his life.

And yet as he wraps up these three chapters, Paul bursts into praise about who God is and about what He does. Even though Paul was still anguished over the unbelief of his fellow Jews, he praises God anyway. As we'll see, Paul didn't look at his circumstances

and then decide whether or not to praise God. Rather, he looked at God and concluded, "How can I not give glory to God?!?!"

In other words, Paul was in the very place we often find ourselves: in unresolved, troubling situations and relationships. As we consider Romans 11:33-36, let's allow God to give us a vision for praising Him as a way of life, especially amidst unresolved circumstances.

Paul's Example: Praise amidst "great sorrow and unceasing grief" (Romans 11:33-36; see Romans 9:1-5)

Verse 33 is an exclamation, an expression of wonder at who God is and what God does:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

A literal translation of the first sentence would be, "Oh, the depth of the riches, of the wisdom, and of the knowledge of God." Paul is probably expressing amazement about the depth of three attributes of God: His riches, His wisdom, and His knowledge. Given the context of Romans, Paul probably has in mind God's riches, wisdom, and knowledge in relation to the salvation He provides in Christ.

Let's think about these three attributes one at a time. The term "riches" is sometimes translated "wealth" (in Mark 4:19 Jesus spoke of "the deceitfulness of riches"). When used in a spiritual context, it refers to the abundance of something (as opposed to something being scarce). For example, Romans 2:4 spoke of "the riches of [God's] kindness and tolerance and patience." Ephesians 1:7 speaks of "the riches of [God's] grace." Ephesians 3:16 speaks of "the riches of [God's] glory." Here in Romans 11:33 Paul likely has in mind how God's grace is so abundant that it extends to Jew and Gentile alike. He is rich enough to give salvation to everyone who receives it.

Paul also mentions the depth of God's wisdom. In 1 Corinthians 1:17 through 2:16 Paul discusses the "wisdom of God" in depth. There he writes that even though the message about Christ crucified was "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23-24). Maybe you've talked with people who have basically said, "The idea that a man who was executed in Palestine 2,000+ years ago has anything to do with my eternal condition is foolish." Paul would say that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross demonstrates how brilliant God is. In His wisdom, God provided a substitute for us. Being fully God Jesus was sinless and therefore a suitable sacrifice; being fully human Jesus was qualified to die for humans. When you understand what God has done in Christ, you see the depth of His wisdom.

Finally Paul mentions the depth of God's knowledge. This is probably a reference to God's knowledge about us (as opposed to our knowledge of Him). Scriptures such as Psalm 139 describe how comprehensively God knows each of us. He knew us in our mothers' wombs; He knows our thoughts and our ways. Even though God knows us

exhaustively, He sent His one and only Son to die for us. God's knowledge of us should humble us and prompt us to live honest lives. . . and to live lives of praise.

Paul cried out, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" If you've been a follower of Christ for a long time, these attributes of God can seem like yesterday's news. Instead of prompting spontaneous praise, we're more likely to yawn. In his book on prayer Tim Keller gives an illustration that I find helpful (*Prayer*, p. 86).

Imagine an eight-year-old boy playing with a toy truck and then it breaks. He is disconsolate and cries out to his parents to fix it. Yet as he's crying, his father says to him, "a distant relative you've never met has just died and left you one hundred million dollars." What will the child's reaction be? He will just cry louder until his truck is fixed. He does not have enough cognitive capacity to realize his true condition and be consoled. In the same way Christians lack the spiritual capacity to realize all we have in Jesus.

So many times I'm like that eight-year-old boy. I'm inconsolable because of something that's broken in my life or because of some unresolved issue. I get so fixated on my "broken toy truck" that I forget that I have been blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). Paul's exclamation of praise reminds me to step back and give praise for "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" in Christ Jesus.

In the second sentence Paul expresses amazement at how God acts in the world: *How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!* Paul isn't saying that we don't know anything about God and His ways. God has revealed many things about Himself and about the way He works in this world. But there are still lots of things we don't know about God and His ways - things we can't search out, things we can't even fathom.

Notice that Paul actually praises God **because** His judgments are "unsearchable" and His ways are "unfathomable." Paul delights in the fact that God's ways are infinitely higher than our ways. This means that we shouldn't be surprised or troubled when we don't understand what God is doing in a specific situation. . . or why God hasn't answered a prayer the way we expected. It would be troubling if you and I **could** exhaustively understand God and His ways. It's only right that there's mystery in our relationship with God.

In verses 34 and 35 Paul quotes Old Testament passages that express how unsearchable God's ways really are. He first quotes from Isaiah 40:13.

34 For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?

Isaiah 40 is that great chapter in which God is described as the One who "has measured the waters in the hollow of His Hand" and who "marks off the heavens by the span" and who "weighed the mountains in a balance" (Isaiah 40:12). The Creator towers over His creation.

In light of the fact that we are a very minuscule part of His creation, Isaiah asks in 40:13, “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” The answer is “nobody.” Humans can’t read the minds of other people; we certainly can’t read the mind of God. We only know what He has revealed to us through creation, through His actions, and through His Word. Isaiah next asks, “Who became His counselor?” Again, the answer is “nobody; God never comes to any of us for advice/counsel.”

Instead of being frustrated (or outraged) because we have questions that God hasn’t answered, we need to make peace with our status as “the created.” Instead of grumbling about what we *don’t* know, we should dive deeper into what we *do* know. I don’t want to trivialize legitimate questions about God and His ways; some people wrestle with such issues more than others. But I do think that when our minds are saturated with Scripture, we ask different questions and better questions than we would otherwise. Since the Bible is so God-centered, when we immerse ourselves in Scripture we tend to ask God-centered (instead of self-centered) questions. We tend to look at our unresolved circumstances in light of what Jesus experienced in this world.

In verse 35 Paul quotes from Job 41:11.

35 Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?

Again, the answer is “nobody.” Nobody has given gifts to God in such a way that He is now obligated to repay. God is nobody’s debtor. God gives plenty of gifts (see James 1:17), but such gifts are always sheer grace (wholly undeserved and unmerited).

Notice how Paul concludes chapter 11:

36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Paul is making a comprehensive theological statement here. First, he says of God that all things are “from Him.” In an absolute sense, everything in the universe comes from God. He is the Creator of everything and everyone. God is the source of everything.

Second, he says that all things are “through Him.” Most commentators take this to mean that God is the sustainer of everything. He doesn’t create and stand aloof. He is involved in every area of life. Third, Paul writes that all things are “to Him.” God is the goal of everything.

This statement that God is the *source*, the *sustainer*, and the *goal* of all things provides a grid through which we can evaluate every area of life. Our marriages, our careers, our finances, and this church are “from Him and through Him and to Him.” Everything exists for the glory of God.

That being the case, we’re not surprised that Paul adds, “To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” Paul is basically affirming what *will actually be the case*: For all of eternity

God's reputation will grow and grow and grow. The new heaven and new earth will be the most God-centered existence imaginable. People who don't appreciate God won't be there; they wouldn't like it there anyway. Since the entire created order is headed toward this God-centered existence where He will be glorified forever, praise only makes sense. When we praise Him, we are rehearsing the things that are true now and will be true then.

And so Paul gives us ***an example of how we can praise God and anticipate the glory*** that will be His forever. Given the context of Romans 9 through 11 and Paul's anguish over the unbelief of his fellow Jews, Paul gives us an example of how we can praise God in the midst of unresolved circumstances.

Is it your habit to praise God (and anticipate the glory that will be His forever) in the midst of confusion and disappointment and unresolved circumstances? Everything we've seen about God in this passage is true independent of our circumstances. The alternative is to say, "God, I will praise you if I feel like it or if my circumstances are good." Since we often don't feel like it, and since our circumstances are often bad, God is robbed of praise and glory. And when we fail to praise God, our perception of Him is skewed.

Mark Batterson (in *Wild Goose Chase*, p. 71) makes this observation:

"In the beginning, God made man in His image. Man has been making God in his image ever since.

"Call it naturalism. Call it anthropomorphism. Call it idolatry. Call it what you will. The result of this spiritual inversion is ***a god who is about our size and looks an awful lot like us.*** . . ."

One way to avoid making God in our own image is through praise - intentionally expressing to God how awestruck we are at who He is and what He does. I'd like to encourage all of us to praise God both corporately and individually.

Corporate Praise. It is very common to hear people downplay the role of corporate worship (at least I hear those voices quite regularly). Some would even say that when we leave church it's time to go back into "the real world." But we would argue that what we sing about and hear about and pray about ***is*** the real world; we would argue that the unseen spiritual world is every bit as real as the physical world.

Corporate worship/praise plays a very strategic role in our lives. In corporate worship we are led to a place of praise we might not otherwise go on our own. For example, the songs we sing give voice to truths about God that often fade from our minds during the week. Earlier this morning we sang, "Now the curse of sin has no hold on me" - a statement that is true for every believer. Sometimes that doesn't seem true; but singing that truth here today makes it eminently believable.

Paul Trip makes the statement that the church gathering for worship is nothing less than a “glory war.” The question here today is whether or not our hearts will be captured by the glory of God or by some lesser glory. As we live in this world we are often seduced by lesser glories. We look to people and things and experiences to give us what only God can give us: life, identity, security, and hope. In corporate worship we are brought back to our senses and we praise God that He is our only Savior and our only source of security, hope, and life.

Corporate worship can and should equip us to praise God and live for His glory.

Individual Praise. We can also praise God individually throughout the week. We do this through prayer and through our thoughts, words, and actions. We do this by what we do and by what we choose not to do.

If someone were to follow you around this week (creepy thought, I know) and could hear your thoughts and words, and see the way you interact with people, the way you do your work, the way you deal with unresolved issues, etc. . . what would they conclude? Would they conclude, “That man/woman/boy/girl lives for the glory of God!”? Or would they conclude, “To him/her God’s not that big of a deal. . .”?

The fact of the matter (and this is not creepy) is that “all things are open and laid bare” before the eyes of God. In a very objective sense, God sees and knows everything we think and say and do. He knows the motives of our hearts. Because He is slow to anger and full of lovingkindness, this should be a great comfort. This means that when nobody else understands you or believes you, your heavenly Father sees and knows and takes great delight in the glory you’re giving Him - especially in the midst of unresolved issues.

“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all to the glory of God.”