

Worship: the Highest Privilege, Part 1 --- Romans 11:33-36

March 1, 2020

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? ³⁵Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? ³⁶For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Introduction

What is the ultimate goal of your life? What are you trying to accomplish with all the fuss and flurry of activity? Probably one of the most penetrating accounts in the Bible concerning the priority and focus of life is the record of Jesus's visit to Lazarus's house.

Luke 10:38-42 He [Jesus] entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to the His word. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." ⁴¹But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; ⁴²but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

The words that our Lord used to describe Martha were "distracted" (pulled from every direction), "worried and bothered." These are words that so easily describe us. We get so caught up in the here and now that we lose our focus. But really only one thing should have your utmost attention. You should be primarily pulled in one direction; that is being consumed with the love, devotion, and adoration of God permeating every area of your life.

The Westminster Catechism states that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Paul is an example of a believer who had chosen, as Jesus said about Mary, the one necessary good part of life. He had a singular focus on the Lord Jesus Christ so that the chief goal in his life was to praise and glorify Him. Listen to what Paul wrote in our text this morning.

Romans 11:33-36 *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His*

ways! ³⁴For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? ³⁵Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? ³⁶For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Here is a prime example of true worship in the heart of a believer whose focus is the Lord. The overall purpose of the Church is to glorify God, to praise Christ, and to worship Him. In Ephesians 1, we are told multiple times that God has established His church to the praise of His glory.

Ephesians 1:3-8a;11-14 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love, ⁵He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace ⁸which He lavished on us. . . . ¹¹In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, ¹²to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. ¹³In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation--having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

The first priority of our lives is to glorify God and worship Him. The first priority in each of our individual lives is not our own well-being or our own comfort or to further our own agendas. We are here to glorify Jesus Christ and enjoy Him.

Jesus glorified the Father while He was on this earth. He did not exalt Himself but made it clear that He was on earth to do the Father's will. Jesus' example instructs us about the primary reason we were born again and why God keeps us on this earth. We are here to glorify God.

In our text this morning, Paul glorified and worshipped God by recognizing a number of His attributes. We will find in our study that praise and worship are fueled by exposure to God through His Word. When we come face-to-face with Him, there is reverential fear and worship that comes forth. A noteworthy instance of worship as a result of encountering God appears in 2 Chronicles 7 after the temple was dedicated by Solomon.

2 Chronicles 7:1-3 *Now when Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the house. 2The priests could not enter into the house of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD'S house. 3All the sons of Israel, seeing the fire come down and the glory of the LORD upon the house, bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave praise to the LORD, saying, "Truly He is good, truly His lovingkindness is everlasting."*

This praise of God, *"Truly He is good, truly His lovingkindness is everlasting,"* is akin to Paul's doxology at the end of Romans 11. In light of what we have learned in our study of this chapter, praise should be our response today when we see the cosmic miracle of God keeping His promise to the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham, in bringing them back to their country after they were scattered for 2,000 years. As we delve into God's Word and learn about Him and what He is like and what He has done, our heart's response is to praise Him and glorify Him forever. I want to point your thoughts this morning to your highest calling as a believer; specifically, the privilege and singular focus of worshipping, praising, and glorifying the Person of Jesus Christ.

Review

Last week we studied a foundational attribute of God that evokes worship; namely, God does not change. We have learned that God has purposed to set aside the Jews for a time for the sake of Gentile salvation. However, it is only for a time, after which God will again turn to the Jews. There will be widespread conversion in the nation of Israel at Christ's return.

God will fulfill His promises to the nation of Israel because of the unchanging love He demonstrated toward Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God chose the Jews to be His special people, and nothing that has happened since, or that will happen in the future, can change that choice or relationship. Why not? Because of the unchanging mercy of God. He does not change.

We saw last week that Paul mentioned "mercy" four times in this last section of Romans 11. Many other great Bible texts also speak about mercy. I told you that in one of the most profound passages, Moses asked to be shown God's glory. So God hid Moses in the cleft of the rock and covered him with His hand while His glory passed by.

God said in Exodus 33:19, *"I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to*

whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion [mercy] on whom I will show compassion [mercy].” God declares that at the very heart of His being, He is a merciful God.

Exodus 34:6-7 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”

The very essence of God is mercy, grace, compassion, and lovingkindness. These attributes are unchanging.

Ephesians 2:4-5 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).

Yes, last week we focused on the unchanging mercy of God in Christ. And in this way we come to the close of our study of this amazing eleventh chapter of Romans. We have studied the great prophetic statement of Paul about God's future salvation for the Jews and, at the same time, the corresponding Gentile salvation. We have examined God's promise to the Jews to bring them back into their land and to save them through their Messiah, Christ Jesus. We can see today that God, by His providence, is in the process of bringing literally millions of Jews back into their homeland. God is unchanging in His promises.

Worship: the Highest Privilege, Part 1

A believer should have two responses to prophecy—holy living and praise to God. A man at a church where my dad pastored in California thought he had calculated the exact day of Christ's return. Since this man had considerable wealth, he liquidated his assets and moved to Israel. There he spent weeks on the Mount of Olives, waiting for Jesus to return. He wanted to be there for this epic, historic event. You can imagine what the main problem was: Christ did not return.

While this man's actions were extreme, many people today think (like this man) that they have prophecy all figured out. They simply don't sell all that they have and go to Israel. Prophecy should, however, encourage believers to live in an eager anticipation. Furthermore, Christians should be careful to live in a manner worthy of the Gospel.

That is Peter's message in 2 Peter 3:3-14. *“Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.’ For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice [they willfully forget or deliberately overlook] that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.*

9The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 10But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 11Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God 13But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 14Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless.

Prophecy should not evoke a desire to disengage in life as you see the fulfillment approaching. Prophecy should encourage you to make sure that you are in the faith and to live in such a way that glorifies Christ. Prophecy should enable you to meditate on verses 11, 12, and 14, *“What sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God 14Since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless.”*

Prophecy should affect the way we live, but it should also affect us in another deep way. Prophecy, and the Word of God in general, should provoke worship of this God who is able to bring about what He promised. Worship of God was Paul's response to all that he had written up to the end of Romans 11.

Paul's response to this eternal God, who demonstrates mercy to all and who directs man's history to accomplish His will, was to break out in a magnificent doxology to God. An old hymn contains these words:

When all Thy mercies, O my God,
My rising soul surveys,

Transported with the view, I'm lost
In wonder, love and praise!

That is the purpose of the Church—to give glory to God. When we are functioning properly, these truths provoke a great and holy WOW! As Paul thought about the mercies of God, he became overwhelmed with the greatness and majesty of God and he broke out in an amazing expression of praise and worship.

I must confess, and I think my thoughts are also shared by many, that after studying most of Romans 11, I wanted to jump quickly to chapter 12 and “get practical,” instead of taking time to focus on Paul's response here. But Paul himself paused, amazed at this great, sovereign God Who designs the Gospel for salvation and Who guides the nations to accomplish His will.

This morning, as we begin to wrap up our study of chapter 11, I want to bring your attention to the subject of the worship of God as a result of knowing truth He revealed.

I want to begin by giving you a working definition of worship: “Worship is the heart cry of the soul to God expressing the supreme value of God and love for God as it meditates on the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and all that God has revealed of Himself through His Word and through creation.”

Charles Spurgeon wrote a helpful thought concerning the worship of God prompted as one studies God. “The highest science, the loftiest study that can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God who [sic] he calls his Father.

“There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a study of God. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can grasp and grapple with. In them we feel a kind of self achievement and go our way with the thought, ‘Behold, I am wise.’

“But when we come to this master-science of the study of God, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and with solemn declaration say, ‘I am but of yesterday, I know nothing.’

“No subject of study and contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thought of God. But while the subject humbles the mind it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe. The most excellent study for expanding the soul is the science of Christ and Him crucified and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest continued investigation of the subject of the Deity.

“And while humbling and expanding, this subject is exceedingly consoling and comforting. Oh, there is in the meditating on Christ, a medicine for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quiet for every grief. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea. Be lost in His immensity, and you will come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated.

“I know nothing which can so comfort the soul, so calm the waves of sorrow and grief, so quiet the winds of trials as a devout meditating upon the subject of the Godhead.”

As we read Paul's doxology in these last verses of Romans 11, we see that he would heartily agree with Spurgeon. *“³³Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? ³⁵Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? ³⁶For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”*

Worship of God flows out of knowledge of God. One pastor wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” But if the truth be known, many of us hardly think about God at all. Sadly, I wonder how many in our day, even church members, take time to regularly think about God, and to fill their minds with what He has revealed about Himself.

It was well said that no people ever rise higher than their idea of God. A loss of the sense of God's high and transcendent character always precedes a loss of a people's moral values and even their regard for human life.

So again, by way of introduction into this great doxology at the end of chapter 11, I want to direct your attention to worship, and that worship is the response of the soul to the knowledge and understanding of Christ and the Gospel. (You may have already noticed that if you are looking for an outline this morning, you

will not find one. I want to simply convey to you some basic thoughts about worship.)

Donald Grey Barnhouse was a great Presbyterian preacher. He related an account in which, after preaching in Beaumont, Texas, and leaving the city, he saw a billboard that read, "Go and worship God in the church of your choice." He pulled to a red light and heard in the car beside him the voice of a child reading the billboard. The child asked, "Daddy, what does worship mean?" The father replied, "It means to go to church and listen to the preacher preach."

That is a very sad definition of worship. Unfortunately, the man is not alone in his understanding of what worship involves. When people think of worship, most think of Sunday morning church services and more particularly the singing time. On most church kiosks they give the schedule for Sunday morning, including the time of the "Worship Service." But the Word of God gives a much broader picture of worship.

Worship is a hot topic today in Christian circles. Some churches emphasize the "worship service" to an extreme. It has become a major drawing card to get people into their churches. There used to be a billboard visible as you leave Elk River on which a church advertised, "We will not bore the hell out of you." On it was a picture of a guy playing an electric guitar, looking like he toured with Bruce Springsteen. Some people base their choice of where they attend church solely on what the worship is like, meaning, "Is it traditional or contemporary?"

But worship is a way of life rather than an event. Worship cannot be isolated to just one segment of our lives. Real worship is the overflow of a life that is saturated with the Persons of the Triune God, the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Praise and worship spill out of a heart that is consumed with God. You will recall the disciples on the road to Emmaus who were listening to Jesus explain the Old Testament in light of who He is. These disciples later said, *"Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"*

True worship is the heart's response to exposure to the truth of God. It is not emotion for emotion's sake. Much of what is called "worship" today is for the benefit of the participants, not God. Many are looking for an emotional release to forget their problems for a while; they haven't come in order to respond to God.

When we talk about worship, we are referring to something that we give to God. Although we tend to think of worship in terms of what it does for us, we are not

the issue. Christ is the focus. The essence of worship is a consuming, selfless desire to give to God praise and adoration.

I read of an account of a christening party for a baby in a wealthy Boston suburb. The parents opened their lavish home to friends and relatives who had come to celebrate the wonderful addition of a child to this family. As the party was moving along and the people were having a wonderful time, eating and drinking and enjoying one another, somebody asked, "By the way, where is the baby?" The heart of the mother jumped, and she instantly left the room and rushed into the master bedroom where she had left the baby asleep in the middle of the massive bed. The baby was dead, smothered by the coats of the guests.

What a picture of how we treat God. We want to worship God, but He can be smothered in all the things that consume our time and energy. We come to celebrate Christ, yet our gatherings can be staged primarily for us and not to honor the very One on Whom we came to focus.

Worship is a response built on truth about God. Psalm 145:18 "*The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.*"

If we are to worship in truth and the Word of God is truth, we must worship out of an understanding of God from His Word. In his book, Between Two Worlds, John Stott explains this relationship between worship and the truth in the Word of God. "The Word and worship belong permanently to each other. All worship is an intelligent and loving response to the revelation of God because it is the adoration of His name, all of who He is."

Stott goes on to say that preaching the word of God is part of worship and evokes worship. "Far from being an alien intrusion into worship, the reading and preaching of the Word is actually indispensable to worship. It is the unnatural divorce between worship and the Word of God that allows for the low level of so much contemporary worship. Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor, and our knowledge of God is poor because the place of the Word of God has been pushed aside."

When the early Church met together, believers came in order to be taught by the apostles. The truth about God was central to their gatherings.

Worship is not an emotional exercise with God-words that induce certain feelings for the sake of emotion. The Corinthian Church had gone to an extreme of enthusiastic, mindless activity. They were setting content and truth

aside so they could have external, emotional experiences.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25, *“Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? 24But if all prophesy [which was the clear speaking forth of God’s Word], and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; 25the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.”*

I like what John MacArthur says about the two extremes of worship. He says, “Sincerity, enthusiasm, and aggressiveness are important in worship but they must be based upon truth. Truth is foundational, but if it does not result in an eager, excited, enthusiastic heart, it is deficient. Enthusiastic heresy is heat without light. Barren orthodoxy is light without heat.”

So I am not encouraging worship without emotion. All I am saying is that, unless enthusiasm and emotion are linked to the truth, there is no worship. Truth is at the heart of worship. When truth enters into the heart of the believer, the response of the believer to truth in praise and adoration to God is worship. The emotion tied to worship has God at its center, not self.

Turn to Nehemiah 8:1-6. The Jews had come back to the land of Palestine, having been in exile. They had brought out the Word of God and were going to read it to the people. *“And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. 2Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. 3He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.*

“4Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. 5Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.”

This attitude must be carried over into daily living. It is essential to living a worshipful life.

Worshipping God according to truth is what drives us to learn all we can about God, His character, His attributes. Worship is not only learning about Him, but also spending time with Him, talking to Him in prayer. As we see more and more of God for Who He is, our hearts respond in praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and worship. As we understand what He has done for us, the Christian's response is thanksgiving and gratitude.

True worship involves every area of our lives. We are to honor and praise God in everything. How we live and how we think are vital to our worship of God. Listening to the word of God preached is worship. Giving your money to God is worship. All of what you do and think reflects a life consumed with Who God is.

In this way we grow in our understanding of this eternal God and fuel our worship and praise to Him. Especially in those doctrines that stretch us, our souls shout out in worship, affirming that His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways—He is higher.

Psalm 2:11 Worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling.

Psalm 95:6-7 Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

Revelation 15:3-4 "Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! 4Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; for ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED."

Conclusion

I want to conclude this morning by reading from Ezekiel 1 about the visions of God experienced by Ezekiel. Notice how many times he uses the words "like," "appearance," and "resembling" in his description. He cannot tell what God is; he can only say what He is like.

Ezekiel 1:1 Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

Ezekiel 1:4-11 *As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire. 5Within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. 6Each of them had four faces and four wings. 7Their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf's hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze. 8Under their wings on their four sides were human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them, 9their wings touched one another; their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward. 10As for the form of their faces, each had the face of a man; all four had the face of a lion on the right and the face of a bull on the left, and all four had the face of an eagle. 11Such were their faces.*

Ezekiel 1:13-14 *In the midst of the living beings there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches darting back and forth among the living beings. The fire was bright, and lightning was flashing from the fire. 14And the living beings ran to and fro like bolts of lightning.*

Ezekiel 1:22 *Now over the heads of the living beings there was something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal, spread out over their heads. . . . 26Above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. 27Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. 28As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.*

Ezekiel was attempting to describe just the angels and the glory that surrounds God, but he cannot. This is why God prohibited in the Ten Commandments the worship of Himself by images. There is no way to depict even the glory of God, much less God Himself. A graven image could never capture the Person of God because He is transcendent, separate, holy.

Exodus 20:4 *You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.*

Even with Christ, I believe there is a reason why there were no likenesses made of Christ. It is clear that man would worship even the image left behind, as has

happened in the Catholic Church.

Getting back to my original question, what is the ultimate goal of your life? What are you trying to accomplish with all the fuss and flurry of activity? Jesus said, *“Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”* Singular focus—the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

We will begin to reflect on God's perfect knowledge and ways that are higher than our ways: *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!*