

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD IS HIS ETERNAL PURPOSE

Romans 11: 33-36

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Describe a recent time when “exclaimed”, that is, you raised your voice or altered the tone of your voice in order to express a strong emotion. Why did you “exclaim”?

You and I raise our voices and cry out when we are impressed with or delighted in something or when we are disappointed or angry about something. Exclamations are the spontaneous verbal responses we make when we are affected by something. When we are affected with strong feelings of joy, sadness, anger, etc. we generally exclaim out of what affects us. Parents exclaim over their children's accomplishments and over their children's disobedience. Shoppers exclaim over great buys they made and when their purchases don't measure up to their expectations. Sports fans exclaim when their teams do well and when their teams do poorly. All humans, everywhere, exclaim over the things that affect them either positively or negatively.

STUDY

1. What clues are there in Romans 11:33-36 that Paul is making an exclamation? Is it an exclamation of delight or of anger/sorrow?

In our English translations there are a number of “exclamation marks” at the end of several of the sentences. The first word is “O”, which is a verbal clue that what follows is an exclamation. The exclamation that Paul is making here is an exclamation of wonder and delight in God.

2. Make a list of the things in these verses that he is delighted about, that he is expressing his wonder over. (The best translation of v. 33 is

in the ESV: “O the depths of the riches and of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God.”)

Paul is full of wonder over the depth of the riches of God, the depth of the wisdom of God and the depth of the knowledge of God. He is also full of amazement at the fact that his judgments (decisions) are unfathomable and his ways are unsearchable. Additionally, he cannot contain himself as he considers that no being has ever understood God's reasoning and no one has ever been God's counselor. He is dumbstruck by the fact that no one has ever given God anything so that God would be obligated to pay them back. He cannot be bribed or put in the debt of anyone because he needs nothing from anyone. All things in the universe, every created thing and every action in the universe come from God and come by means of God and return to God's glory. He is alone in his being and power and he alone is worthy of glory and honor.

3. What is it that has caused Paul to be so amazed at the awesomeness of God?

What he has written about God and his work of saving his people during the last 11 chapters of the book of Romans. Paul's appreciation for and affection for and astonishment at God is due to all that he has written about the saving work of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Romans 1-11. Paul is full of delight in God because of his knowledge of God and his saving work in Christ. His head is full of truth about God which fills his heart with joy in God which spills out from his lips in praise to God.

4. A portion of what Paul has been reflecting upon is God's relationship to national Israel in Romans 9-11. Read Romans 9: 1-15. What are some things that Paul tells us about God's relationship to Israel in this passage?

First, Paul is full of grief over the fact that most of national Israel is rejected by God and living in unbelief (see 10:1-6 as well). In vv. 3-5 he shows all the ways Israel has been the recipient of untold kindness and mercy. They have been adopted by God as sons, they have been shown the divine glory on numerous occasions, God has made

numerous covenants with them beginning with Abraham, he has given them the law, the temple worship and hundreds of promises. The chosen and faithful patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons are their ancestors and the highest grace bestowed upon the nation of Israel is that Jesus, the eternal Son of God who became a man, traces his human ancestry through the nation of Israel. However, in v. 6 Paul says that the people of God, the people who are the recipients of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not the same people as all those who are biologically descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Israel as the true people of God is not the same as Israel, all those biologically and religiously related to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He then proves from the OT that this has always been the case. In vv. 7-9 he notes that while Abraham had Ishmael by Hagar and another 6 sons by Keturah, his second wife, only Isaac received the promise, only Isaac was born by the power of God's promise. As he says in v. 8, it is not the natural, biological children of Abraham who are the children of God but those who are born by the promise of God. Then he uses Isaac's twin sons as a second example. He points out that prior to their birth, before they had done anything good or bad, God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. He loved Jacob and he hated Esau. He did this so that his purpose in election would stand. That purpose is: salvation is entirely a work of God's grace, not man's effort. The main point is that true, spiritual Israel has never been the same as all those people biologically descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The true people of God have been those chosen by God, sovereignly, freely, graciously without any consideration given to who they are or what they have done.

5. This is only one of the hundreds of truths that Paul talks about in Romans 1-11 that creates this exclamation. Reflect now on what all this doctrine reveals to Paul about God and is therefore the source of all his joy. What is so awesome about God as expressed in each part of vv. 33-36?:

- The depth of the riches of God: *The riches of God especially relates to all the wealth that he freely gives to his elect people in and with Jesus Christ. See Ephesians 3:8-9, 14-21, Col. 1:27.*
- The depth of the wisdom of God: *God's wisdom is infinitely high above the wisdom of men and is supremely displayed in the cross*

of Jesus Christ. God has made a way to forgive guilty sinners without becoming an unjust and corrupt God. See 1 Cor. 1: 18-25 & Rom. 3: 21-26.

- The depth of the knowledge of God: *God's saving work in Christ reveals that God's knowledge of all things, past, present and future is exhaustive and complete because he has an elect people chosen by grace (11:1-8). He has to know all things in one simple act in order to order all the events that will accomplish the salvation of every individual that he has chosen.*
- How unfathomable are his judgments: *God's judgments and decisions are beyond human comprehension.*
- How unsearchable are his ways: *The ways of God in running his universe and saving his people cannot be searched out by man. We can only experience them as they unfold, we cannot explain or predict how it should happen.*
- No one has ever known the mind of the Lord: *Humans only can know truth when God reveals it to us. We do not and cannot know what God knows unless he reveals it to us. Praise God that he has chosen to do so, otherwise we would be blind and stupid forever! (see 1 Cor. 2: 8-16)*
- No one has ever given God any counsel: *God doesn't need any advice and indeed no one can tell him anything he doesn't already know. Nothing catches him by surprise. He needs no help in running the universe but is perfectly working all things out according to the pleasure of his own will. (see Eph. 1:11-12)*
- No one has ever given God anything that obligated God to repay: *God needs nothing and so no one can give him anything that would obligate him to respond in any way. All that God gives to humans is free, unconstrained grace, not conditioned by anything we have ever done, thought or said. God freely, sovereignly gives his gifts of creation and salvation to human beings out of his own pleasure and will, not according to anything we have ever done. This also means that we never have the right to complain about anything that ever happens to us as we have never done anything that obligates God to be kind to us. We ought always to give thanks to God for all things.*
- All things are from God: *This means all things in creation and salvation are given as gifts from God. Everything that happens comes ultimately from God. (Eph. 1:11-12)*

- All things are through (by means of) God: *All things in creation and salvation are given to us through the power of God's sovereign Spirit, not by anything we do. (Job 9:24, 12:13-25, Isa. 45:7)*
- All things are to God: *All things point to the supremacy of God in all things. All things in heaven and earth are to his glory.*
- To him alone belongs all the glory

6. Based upon the structure of Paul's letter, describe the process by which true, Christian joy comes to human beings.

We are exposed to the truth of God as contained in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit causes us to see the glory of God in this truth. Our hearts fill with joy and delight in God as we see his glory. Our lips are full of praise to God and our lives are full of love to people as a result of the joy we have in the glory of God.

7. What can you do to have the same vision of God that produces the same wonder in God that yields the same praise for God?

Listen to, read, meditate upon, memorize, God's word. Study doctrine. Pray all the time that God would enable you to see his glory in the truth you are being exposed to. Confess your sin of being blind to the glory of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus. Keep crying out for mercy.

8. What one thing will you do this week to seek to increase your joy in God?

You ought to grow in your knowledge of the history of God's saving work as recorded in the Scriptures so that you can be full of joy in God.

9. Compare Romans 8: 28-39 with Romans 12: 9-21. What is the main difference between these two passages?

Romans 8 is a description of what is true for every Christian. It is a statement of what God has done, will do and is doing on our behalf. Romans 12 is a series of commands. It tells us how we are to live.

10. What do the "therefore" and "in view of God's mercy" in 12:1 tell us about the relationship between the description of God's saving work in Christ in Romans 1-11, Paul's joy in 11:33-36 and God's commands on how to live in Romans 12-15?

All of these commands are given as a result of all the glory explained in chapters 1-11. In light of this gracious work of God to save the elect by means of Christ's life, death and resurrection Paul exhorts us, as Christians to live a certain kind of life. The entire motive behind Christian living is a knowledge of and delight in the great saving work of God in and through Jesus Christ. Paul is not saying that we are to live the Christian life out of gratitude for what God has done for us. We are not to try to pay God back for his kindness. That would make v. 35 a lie. You can never pay God back and you should never try. It is arrogance to believe that you can do anything to repay God. You are to rejoice in and give thanks for what God has done for you but you are not to try to pay him back. God doesn't need you or your obedience. You are the one who needs God. When Paul says, "in view of (or "by") God's mercies", he means that we are to obey these commands counting on God's mercy, calling upon his mercy, living for more experiences of his mercy. We obey by faith, believing that we will be happier obeying than not obeying. The "therefore" and "in view of God's mercy" tell us how it is that the Christian does the will of God. We obey these commands because it gives us pleasure to do so. If obedience to God is not a pleasure than we are not obeying by faith. Rather we are obeying by works or by duty.

11. How does the command we all were given on Thanksgiving Day, "Come to the table and eat", illustrate the nature of God's commands to those who, like Paul, are the recipients of God's mercy?

All of us, joyfully obeyed that command. While we were obeying the command to eat we didn't groan about it, rather we praised our host and the quality of the foods of which we partook. We enjoyed fulfilling the command. This is how it is with every command of God. It is an invitation to come and feast upon his mercy. You will never know the joy of belonging to Christ without denying yourself honor in order to honor another Christian. You will never know the delight of being

loved by God as long as you hold onto grudges and seek to repay others for the evil they do to you. When God commands you to be patient in affliction, he is inviting you to enter into the joy of his salvation. Grumbling about the trouble in your life or working to escape some affliction by your own means is like devouring a loaf of white bread with no butter on it and nothing to wash it down instead of coming to the Thanksgiving table. Refusing to accept other Christians as Jesus accepted you is to refuse the hospitality of your gracious host and to eat your Thanksgiving meal by yourself. I prefer a plate of cold beans eaten in an unheated room by myself to enjoying a turkey feast with my family. That is what we are saying when we refuse to obey the commands of God, for the commands of God are not burdensome to God's people but an invitation to feast upon his mercy and to discover his love is better than life.

12. Do you view God's commands as invitations to feast upon his mercy or as duties and burdens to be endured? Why?

13. What can you do to grow in your delight in obedience?

You ought to grow in your knowledge of the history of God's saving work as recorded in the Scriptures so that you can happily live like a Christian.