

Romans 11:33-12:2

I love the way Paul rounds off this section on Israel with a marvellous paean of praise. It's a stunning doxology that puts the focus on the overwhelming greatness of God. When Paul reflects on the hand of God in the life of a nation, the least he can do is break forth in spontaneous praise. Paul's study of God and his ways among us turns his heart to music. He is exuberant in his praise! When Paul thinks about the magnificent grace of God in the life of ordinary folk—be they Jew or Gentile—he can't contain himself, so he pays eloquent tribute to the faithfulness of God. The God we meet here is a God who remains unrivalled, a God whose splendour is unmatched, a God in a league of his own. I reckon, when it comes to deity, God is out there on his own, he is second to none, the incomparable God.

You see, there are times when we're out of our depth, moments when we're left gasping—this is one of those rare occasions. It seems to me there are those times when we handle mysteries so staggering that our theology turns to hymnology and, all we can do, is sing God's glorious praise. It leaves a wonderful taste in our mouth! Majestic!

The intrinsic thought woven into the fabric of verses 33 and 34 is that we can never get to the bottom of God. In the best sense of the word, he is unfathomable. Parts of the ocean floor can't be reached by human divers or even robotic probes. It's just so far down, so deep! Yet the wisdom and knowledge of God are even more unreachable.

I think it's worth noting the difference between 'wisdom' and 'knowledge'—knowledge is the gathering of information, the accumulation of facts; wisdom is knowing what to do with it. In both areas, God excels!

Isaiah was singing from the same song sheet when he wrote: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord, 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are

my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” That was Isaiah 55:8, 9. Even if God were to reveal his mysteries to us, they would be deeper than we could possibly comprehend. Think about it like this: who could ever suggest anything that God had not thought of first? In one sense, God never has a new thought!

You see, Paul admires God for who he is! He exclaims the boundless extent of the Lord’s understanding. His wisdom and knowledge are immeasurable. He knows all there is to know about what was, what is, and what will be. He knows what is both possible and impossible. And he has the innate ability to apply his encyclopaedic, infinite knowledge with perfect skill and precision. No wonder Paul says what he does!

The next verse, verse 35, reminds us of something which is uncontrollable—‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ Challenging words. Sombre words. The contrast with human beings is glaringly obvious for one of the ways we have of monopolising others is to get them into our debt.

It may be a moral obligation that reasons like this—hey, buddy, I did you a favour, it’s about time you returned it! Or it may be a financial obligation—we know from Proverbs 22:7 that we become a servant to the one we borrow from.

The reality is God is so different! He is no man’s debtor. He doesn’t owe us any favours—there is nothing outstanding on his account with man! No one can say to him: ‘Hey, God, you must do this for me because I did that for you!’ No, it doesn’t work like that! None of us could ever give him anything that would put him in debt. What God does, he does of his own free will, he does it because he chooses to do it, not because he feels any sense of obligation.

The final verse in Romans 11 takes us back to something which is indisputable. Here is a proclamation of the ultimate honour, central focus, and radiant magnificence of God for Paul writes: ‘To him be glory for ever! Amen.’

When we realise the awesome greatness of our God, there is only one appropriate response from our heart and life—total surrender! The word ‘amen’ means ‘so be it’. We are way beyond the point of trying to understand, we no longer seek explanations for this, that, and the other; we recognise that we can’t wrap God around our little finger, so we give in. So be it! Whatever God wants, let it be! That’s the spirit—it’s all about God having his way in our lives, and in our world—he is active on a personal level in your life and mine, he is extremely active internationally for he rules and reigns. It’s an overt plea from the heart of the apostle Paul for men and women to let God be God! And for us to let God do God!

We’ll pause here for a short music break and, when we come back, we’ll move into the practical down to earth section of the book of Romans.

MUSIC BREAK

Why break the habits of a lifetime? That’s Paul! In every one of his epistles, be they long or short, he has a major doctrinal section followed by a hard hitting practical section—it’s belief impacting our

behaviour. You see, following Jesus Christ is all about knowing and doing!

We leave eleven chapters of Bible doctrine behind us—eleven chapters where Paul has covered so much ground, he has given us remarkable insights into the foundational truths of the gospel by looking at sin, justification, sanctification, glorification, and sovereignty. He has shown us God's purpose for man and for the world in which we live.

Paul doesn't stop at the end of Romans 11. Far from it! He says, 'Look folks, if that's the kind of God we have, then here's the kind of people he wants you to be!' There's no chance of any one of us getting off the hook. There's no point in running for cover. We have to face up to the reality of God in our life as Paul sets his sights on Christian service. We know the truth, let's apply it!

The God we meet in Romans is a relational God—a God who thrives on having a healthy relationship with his people. If he is like that, he expects us to reflect that mindset in our dealings with one another. In your life and mine, the greatest impact is made on today's world when we realise that right relationships mean right living!

Paul starts where we would expect him to start—in verses 1 and 2 he homes in on our relationship with God. He kick starts the chapter with the word 'therefore'. When we see that word in the Bible, it's good to stop and ask ourselves the question: what's it there for? Actually, this is the fourth 'therefore' in the epistle so far. The first is in Romans 3:20, it's the 'therefore' of condemnation; the second in Romans 5:1 is the 'therefore' of justification; the third is in Romans 8:1, it's the 'therefore' of assurance; number four is right here in Romans 12:1 and it's the 'therefore' of total dedication.

Says Paul: 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.'

A quick look at this duo of verses tells me that serving Jesus is no easy option. It's not all fluffy pillows and soft recliners. It is a call to sacrificial living and sacrificial service—and, take it from me, that will cost!

Have you ever watched a pigeon and wondered why it walks so funny? Ornithologists, people who know a lot about birds, tell us that a pigeon's peculiar gait allows it to see where it's going. A pigeon cannot adjust its focus while on the move, so between steps it comes to a complete stop, refocuses on the ground, and then takes the next step. It seems to me that there are times in our life when it's good to adopt the pigeon mindset—we need to stop every once in a while and refocus, refocus our thinking and renew our level of commitment!

The big challenge is this: what kind of a sacrifice does Paul want us to make? Basically, he says four things about it, and you can follow them easily in the text!

First and foremost, it's a living sacrifice! It is true that there are some Christians who lay down their life for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They pay the ultimate sacrifice for one reason or another. The facts speak for themselves—did you know, there were more Christians murdered for their faith in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen centuries. The figures are staggering! According to Christian Solidarity International, upwards of 150,000 believers in Jesus Christ are martyred every year!

Having said that, most of us will not be called to suffer that fate, nevertheless all of us are called to be living sacrifices. In 'view of God's mercy' we are to 'offer our bodies' as 'living sacrifices'. Wow! That's where the rubber hits the road for you and me! This is where Paul gets up-close and personal and he doesn't beat about the bush either—he tells it like it is. God is looking for a committed, consecrated people!

A living sacrifice—that's hard, it's really tough! The problem is a living sacrifice keeps crawling off the altar! It's OK one day, we have to make sure we stay there the next day! It's 24/7. At the same

time, a living sacrifice speaks softly and tenderly of the grace and mercy of God.

The story is told of Adoniram Judson, missionary to Burma. He endured tremendous hardships while trying to reach people for Jesus Christ. He spent 17 months in Ava Prison where he was terribly mistreated. For the rest of his life he carried the scars made by the chains and iron shackles used to bind him. Upon his release he courageously asked for permission to go to another province to preach the gospel. The ruler of Burma denied his request, saying that 'my people are not fools enough to listen to anything a missionary might say, but I fear they might be impressed by your scars and turn to your religion.'

True! You see, God is not so much interested in our dying for our faith as he is in our living for the faith. He is not looking for your sacrifice of death but your sacrifice of life. Woodrow Kroll writes that 'a living sacrifice can be a dynamic force to draw others to a living Saviour.'

We'll pause for a break, that'll give you time to think some of these issues through for yourself. When we come back, I want us to look a little further into verse 1 and discover more of what God wants from every one of us.

MUSIC BREAK

A living sacrifice. That's good for starters! Paul moves on to tell us it has to be a 'holy' sacrifice. That word 'holy' means to be set apart, to be used exclusively for the purpose of God. As and when we give our life to Jesus Christ, we are handing over the reins of our life to him. We are more or less saying: 'Lord, it's over to you. My life is in your hands, you do with it what you want to do with it!'

Our all is on the altar—it's 100 percent commitment to Jesus.

Everything has been handed over to him. I mean, everything! That means God has first call on our life—it's up to him to do what he wants to do with us, it's up to him to use us as he sees best. It's no longer what I want to do with my life—it's what God wants to do with my life!

A living sacrifice. A holy sacrifice. It's also a sacrifice that is 'pleasing to God'. Ever wondered, how can the sacrifice of my life be pleasing to the Lord? Well, you only have to take a look at Cain and Abel in Genesis 4! Both men brought a sacrifice, but only one was acceptable to God! And it wasn't Cain's! He pushed his luck when he thought God would be impressed with his horticultural produce. Nice work, good work, but not what God wanted. Abel's was first class, his was spot on—his was an offering by faith. And that element of faith made the world of difference. We know that from Hebrews 11:4.

So it is in your life and mine—it's only as we surrender all to the Lord in an act of faith that we win God's smile of approval. He's not so much interested in what we have to offer to him, he wants us to engage our hearts with his in faith and trust. That's what makes a mega difference!

Paul finishes the verse by encouraging us to do just that as it is a 'spiritual act of worship'. Amazing, isn't it! Our surrender to God is an act of worship. It's reasonable, it's logical, and it's no more and no less than God expects of his children.

That raises worship to a brand new level; most of us tend to see worship as something that we do in church on a Sunday when we sing hymns and all the rest of it. Well, it is, but worship is so much more—it's when we consecrate ourselves to Jesus. In light of what he has done for us, it's the least we can do!

Paul ups the ante when he challenges us to get our act together in verse 2. He doesn't want us to model our life after the ways of this world—he wants us to fashion our lives in the image of Jesus Christ. He is the greatest role model of all time. Before him, all else fades into oblivion; before him, all else pales into insignificance.

The world has its mould and the Christian man should have no part in it—it won't do us any good, either in the short term or in the long term. In fact it will lead us further away from God and that spells danger! In this world God is looking for people who will stand out in the crowd, he's looking for non-conformers!

He also wants us to experience a personal metamorphosis, for that's what Paul means when he talks about being 'transformed by the renewing of your mind'. That describes a change from within. You see, the world wants to change your mind so it exerts pressure from the outside—but the Holy Spirit changes your mind by doing something from the inside. He gives us a new perspective on life, he gives us a fresh insight into global events, he gives us a reason for living—as we apply the word of God to our life we become more spiritual in our thinking. A clear mind, a clean mind, a God centred mind is what Paul is on about in verse 2.

Right thinking leads to right living. When we go down that road we experience life in a new dimension, we discover that God's will is something refreshingly dynamic and positive—it's always for our good, we benefit enormously from doing what God wants us to do and being what God wants us to be. And, at the end of the day, it brings joy and pleasure into our life! Nothing boring about serving Jesus! There's no drudge in walking with the king! It's exciting, it's rejuvenating, it's what life is all about in the third millennium!

We can look at it like this: the basis of our commitment is the mercy of God—the greater our comprehension of what God has done for us, the greater our commitment should be. That's what Isaac Watts meant when he wrote: 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!' The character of our commitment is summed up in two words—it is total and it is reasonable! It's all for Jesus! And it makes a lot of sense to do it!

The demands of our commitment are echoed in two commands in verse 2—one negative, do not conform to the world; and one positive, be transformed! We say 'no' to the world and 'yes' to Jesus Christ. The effect of our commitment is seen in our life and lifestyle as we wholeheartedly embrace the will of God.

It seems to me the only way to live in the twenty first century is for us to live our life sold out to Jesus Christ! Sam Shoemaker said it well: 'To be a Christian means to give as much of myself as I can to as much of Jesus Christ as I know!'