

God and his ways are ineffable, beyond our powers to understand. That, however, is wonderful to know and should make God the more important to us and the more attractive.

“The Mysterious Majesty of God”

Romans 11:33-36

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Paul now completes his exposition of divine election, the mysterious discrimination of God’s grace between one person and another, the plan of God that accounts first for the rejection of unbelieving Israel and then for her ultimate salvation, and the strange ways in which divine judgment can be made an instrument of his mercy, with a magnificent peroration on the inscrutable ways of God, so far beyond our knowing, mere creatures that we are. One fine commentator on Romans entitles this last short paragraph a “Doxology to the Eternal Sovereign.” [H.C.G. Moule, 203]

Text Comment

- v.33 It is fundamental to a biblical mind, this admission that God is far above us and that we are incapable of understanding or explaining his ways. It was precisely his failure to realize this that Job is forced to admit was his cardinal error. He could not clear away the difficulties that the circumstances of his life presented him and we certainly cannot clear them away either; God does not ask us to or give us the means with which to do that. Paul has not supplied us with neat answers to the baffling questions that arise in connection with the life of a world in which only some believe in Christ. He has by no means swept away all the difficulties. We do not understand why God does one thing and then does another; why he saves one person and not another. But he has reminded us that this deep mystery, dark as it is in some ways, is not by any means a nightmare, but the plan and the purpose of an all wise and merciful God who will always prove himself faithful to his perfect character and true to his Word.
- v.35 The citation of Job 41:11 in v. 35 is a reminder that we have no claim on God or his mercy. We cannot put God in our debt. We are merely his creatures and sinful at that.
- v.36 In Holy Scripture the ultimate aim or end or purpose is not the happiness of man but the glory of God. But it remains always the case that the greatest glory of God will be the truest and deepest happiness of men and women, at least of all men and women who have been liberated to see things as they really are.

There is an axiom in theology usually cited in Latin. It goes this way: *finitum non capax infinitum*. It means “the finite is incapable of grasping or comprehending the infinite.” By that is meant, among other things, that finite beings such as human beings, by the limitations of their nature, are incapable of containing an infinite knowledge. This point is made in Christian theology even with regard to the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a man the Lord Jesus could not comprehend, could not contain the infinite knowledge that he had as God the Son. Humanity is, in the nature of the case, finite and so obviously is incapable of infinity, whether an

infinity of knowledge or of presence or of power. [R. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 119] As Augustine famously said in one of his sermons, “If you can grasp it, it isn’t God.”

It is an unassailable conclusion, I would have thought, but it seems largely to have been forgotten in our day. People nowadays expect, for some reason, to understand what God does, the choices that he makes, the events that he orders in the world, and even what he thinks. We hear people all the time say that “my God would not do this” or “my God would not do that” as if the acts of God are predictable and can be reduced to motives and intentions that we human beings can see right through. Older, wiser theologians knew better. Luther spoke of *Deus Absconditus*, the hidden God, by which he meant that God was so far above us that we could never penetrate his mind, his will would always be in most respects inscrutable to us. Why does this happen or that? All we can say is that it is the will of God, we cannot say why God chose to order this or that. We may say that the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, but we virtually never can say that we know why? God sees everything; he sees the connection between one thing that happens in the life of a single individual human being and everything else that happens in all of human life and history. It is all a single fabric in his mind. He knows toward what ends or purposes he has appointed this event or that happenstance, but we cannot see any of this. God is infinite and we are not only finite, but very, very small. Our tiny minds can hold only the tiniest fragment of the knowledge God has.

But there are powerful forces abroad in our culture that render people nowadays disinclined to accept our smallness or insignificance or to give God his rightful place as the Majesty far, far above us.

First, there is the idea of evolution that has stripped the majesty of nature of its power to reveal the majesty of the God who created it. In our age we have learned astonishing things about nature. We have been able to measure the distances that separate us from other heavenly bodies, distances that simply beggar the imagination. Distances computed in the thousands and millions of light years roll off our tongue as if we could begin to comprehend the vastnesses of space represented by such terms. When we say that it would take us 100,000 years to reach the nearest star to earth, besides our own star, at the speeds at which space probes can now travel, we are near to talking nonsense, so little can we grasp the true distance we have described. Or when we read that the Pistol Star is 10 million times brighter than our own sun, the sun we cannot look at without damage to our eyes, what are we really saying that anyone genuinely understands? These things are too great for us. We can compute, but we cannot imagine. And yet the Scripture says that God called all of this into being by the mere utterance of his word and that he controls everything that moves in the vastness of our impossibly immense universe.

Or, at the other end of the spectrum, the fabulous advances in biochemistry and nuclear physics have revealed a measure of complexity and perfection of design and operation in the most minute structures of living things that is nothing short of breathtaking. We are aware now of the astonishing complexity of the single living cell, a microscopically small but impossibly sophisticated factory within the walls of which are found a vast array of complicated, ingenious biochemical machines, memory banks that include more information than is stored in all the computers of mankind, transportation services bringing in and taking out material used by the

cell or manufactured in it, and which cell, on top of all of this, is capable of replicating itself – the entire array of its machinery, its computing and engineering stations, and its plumbing – in a matter of seconds on command. And all of this too the Bible says is the invention of the infinite personal God the impress of whose genius and power we see everywhere we look whether inside the atom or over the entire earth.

No one can begin to explain any of this, but the purveyors of the theory of evolution confidently tell us that it all happened by accident. And if that statement is made often enough and confidently enough people begin to believe it, because there are powerful reasons for sinful human beings *to want to believe it*. And now the evidence for the incomparable genius of the Almighty, his infinite knowledge, his limitless power, his omnipresence, in short, his divine nature as the Creator of heaven and earth, all of this recedes from the mind. The God who alone can account for the breathtaking facts of nature is dethroned from the human mind and heart and replaced by...nothing. And the result is that we are no longer forced to reckon with a God who is capable of making all that is, of designing the artifacts of nature that are so complex that we can hardly conceive of them, and of controlling natural forces from the interior of the atom to the wheeling galaxies of space. God has become part of nature somehow, instead of standing before and above it all, his power and genius so far beyond us as to be utterly beyond our comprehension.

Second, the triumph of humanism in the modern world has led to a profoundly subjectivist culture, in which we are taught to see all things in terms of ourselves. If God is not arranging things for our benefit, then so much the worse for God! In a therapeutic culture, in which the happiness of man is accepted to be the highest good, it is counter-intuitive to speak of a God who has other interests in human life, a God who will judge the wicked and the unrepentant, a God whose standards are the law of life for every human being, a God for whom we exist not who exists for us. Such a universe is increasingly difficult for modern men and women to imagine. The notion that “from God and through God and to God are all things” leaves us in far too minor, too insignificant a position. It is, in fact, an offensive idea.

Third, in a world that thinks like our world does but still must face the reality of human evil and of tribulations of various kinds, many of which are churned up by the life we are living in the world, the only possible recourse is to sentimentality, believing that things are the way we want them to be. We will give credit to God – for most people are theists of some kind – for some good things and refuse to blame him for the bad things. We will put “God Bless America” on the bumpers or back windshields of our cars, but we never imagine that God has something to do with the recession, with widespread unemployment, with bankruptcies and foreclosures, or with earthquakes such as the recent ones in Haiti or Chile. In such a theology, God is reduced to a genial uncle, able to do some things, always ready to pat us on the back, but who finds much of what happens in the world quite beyond him. Such a God we do not have to fear, but such a God is of little importance to us either. The most that we can say for him is that he’s doing the best he can.

This is the God of liberal forms of Christianity, a toothless old man, kindly but of no strong opinions himself and with no definite plans for the future, willing to let men go their own way and work out their own salvation, such as it is. This is a God who watches rather than rules, a

God who would be embarrassed to claim preeminence for himself. Theology has been reduced to anthropology, and God, such as he is, has become little more than a projection of ourselves. And that is why liberal forms of Christianity invariably die. Why their congregations have to sell their church buildings to nearby hospitals and eventually exist only for the few remaining ministers to gather from time to time to wonder aloud why no one pays them any attention and why the denominations budget has to be cut one more time. Their God is utterly irrelevant to human life.

It has been pointed out many times that only a God such as we have described here in these verses at the end of Romans 11 is worth the attention of human beings. Only a God of impenetrable mystery, of inscrutable sovereignty, and of terrible judgment and infinite mercy can satisfy the souls of men and women. And only such a God as Paul has described to us in Romans, only such a God as is revealed everywhere in the pages of Holy Scripture, can account for reality as we encounter it and only such a God can resolve the terrible problems of life and death, can overcome our weakness, and can restore our lives to their proper place.

Men and women, since man's fall into sin, have always wanted, as we say, to call their souls their own; but that means to live a lie, for our souls are not our own. Men and women wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, 'This is our business, not yours.' But there is no such corner. [Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 80] We are mere creatures. We owe our life and its continuation to God breath by breath. He orders the circumstances of our lives and of every life. Nothing happens in this world that is contrary to his plan and purpose. He rules over even the rebellion of men against him. Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from his will and every hair on your head is numbered. The God revealed to us in Holy Scripture is so great, so full of majesty and glory, that beyond a certain point the Scripture makes no effort to attempt to describe him to us. Even such a man as Moses was only permitted to see the after-effects of God's passing by. No one can behold the glory of God and live. *This* is the God Paul has set before us. This is God with whom all men have to do whether they realize it or not. This is the God before whom all the nations are but a drop in the bucket.

Now it is widely thought in our day that presenting *this* view of God to people, however faithful to the biblical teaching it may be, must be a mistake, counter-productive, bad strategy. People don't want to face a God so great, so utterly in control of all things, so far beyond us that we can understand only the outskirts of his plans and purposes unfolding in the life of mankind. People want to love God not fear him. So we are told.

But it is not so. No one will truly love a God who is not worthy of their reverence and who does not leave them awestruck at his terrible majesty and power. Nobody does, nobody ever has. No one will think to worship a God who is merely a mirror image of himself or herself. God must matter and matter absolutely if men and women are to take God seriously. And no one will take God seriously whose will and power do not lie behind even the catastrophes that befall mankind in this world. This world rings with divine judgment but men and women will hear the tolling of that bell only if they realize that Almighty God lies behind the tragedy as surely as the triumph of human life.

Let me illustrate this with two 19th century, very consequential European lives in which two different views of God were held with remarkable implications. Tragic stories of this loss of faith

in the living God can be found everywhere in the modern history of the Christian church. F.C. Baur was one of the most influential theologians of the 19th century, a German theological professor whose work served to undermine the Christian faith of an entire generation of ministers and divinity students and eventually congregations of Christians gathering for worship of a Lord's Day. But as a young man, Ferdinand Christian Baur was full of evangelical zeal. He was an earnest Christian and loved and revered God. But studying in the German university under skeptics he lost his faith. God retired from his view. God shrank in Baur's mind and thinking. Man became greater than God. Life became for him a matter of men not of God, of the will of human beings not of the Majesty on high. Nothing really was left of the young Baur's faith. Though he still called himself a Christian he found he could no longer pray. When his wife lay dying he had to send for an earnest pastor in the neighborhood to come and pray with her and for her. He had no sense of God and so had nothing to offer his wife in that most sacred moment though he continued to think of himself as a Christian minister. He had lost sight of God, the true and living God, the high God of Holy Scripture, and he had lost his soul as a result.

But consider a contrary story. Some of you will know the name Robert Haldane. He is the author of a highly regarded 19th century commentary on Romans. Haldane was a Scottish nobleman of considerable wealth whose life held promise of the typical interests and pleasures of British upperclass life when he was powerfully converted and became a devoted follower of Jesus Christ and servant of the gospel. He invested his great wealth in the spreading of the gospel at home and abroad. At one point he went to Europe to serve the gospel and found himself in Geneva where a crippling rationalism had sucked the life out of French speaking Christianity. Haldane began a Bible study attended by a number of theological students from the Genevan Academy, the theological school founded by John Calvin. From Haldane the young men learned what they were not being taught in their seminary classes. They learned of the glory of God, the sinfulness of men, the atonement of Jesus Christ and the absolute necessity of faith in him. They learned of the terrible seriousness of life and of the infinite value of a human soul. And in that Bible study the gospel took root in a number of hearts and these same men would later take the same message Haldane had taught them from Romans and preach it to others and, in that way, be instrumental in what is called in church history the *Rèveil*, the revival of evangelical Christianity in France and Switzerland in the middle of the 19th century.

In his commentary on these verses at the end of Romans 11, in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, Robert Haldane includes an extract from a letter he had written to one of the professors of theology at the Academy in Geneva, one Prof. Cheneviere who, though teaching in a Christian theological seminary, denied most of the articles of the Christian faith. He was explaining what had happened in this Bible study and the change that had come over these young men. He says this:

“There was nothing brought under the consideration of the students of divinity who attended me at Geneva, which appeared to contribute so effectually to overthrow their false system of religion...as the sublime view of the majesty of God presented in the four concluding verses of this part of the Epistle. Of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things.”

Haldane goes on to say that even the thought that the glory of God must be the true end and purpose of all that happens in the world, which might be thought to offend men, in fact drew these men to God. The greater *he* became in their eyes, the more ineffable his majesty, the more natural it seemed to them that everything should happen with his glory in view, and the more enamored of God they became. He became, in other words, worthy of their worship and worthy of their obedience and service. This was a God to adore and to serve. This was a God one could entrust his life to absolutely in the knowledge that God was possessed of infinite power and infinite wisdom and infinite love. The greater God became in their view the more committed to God these men became, the more sure of their salvation, the more determined to honor God with their lives. And so they did. Monod, Malan, D'Aubigne and others changed the face of the Christian church in Europe in their day by calling it back to the true and living God.

I wonder how many times you would say you have actually been awestruck; struck dumb by something so powerful, so wonderful and so majestic. I have been awestruck only a few times in my life: the moment I stepped for the first time into the cathedral at Chartres, the evening I slept in the hayloft of an Alpine barn above Zermatt with the Matterhorn framed in the window, the moment years ago when I realized the full measure of my love for my wife, and some hours many years ago when I came, as I believe, to feel in my soul the impossible greatness and glory of God. We are not often awestruck. I suspect most of you would say that you have had only an experience or two and, even then, perhaps it was clear to you at the time that this experience could have been, perhaps should have been, wonderful as it was, still much more powerful than it was and it should have lasted longer than it did. So great was the thing you saw, so wonderful the thing that impressed itself upon you so that you couldn't do anything but just stand there in delighted wonder.

But consider this. You have the capacity to be awestruck, to be rendered dumb by something surpassingly great, heart-rendingly beautiful, full of majesty. You have that power. You have the experience within you. Why, for goodness sake? What does that power contribute to your life and your ability to survive, a power you scarcely ever, perhaps some people never, employ? Well, that power that you have to be awestruck, to feel overwhelmed but in an absolutely wonderful and transcendent way has prepared you someday to behold the glory of God. You are ready to be overwhelmed by the divine glory and greatness, to be stupefied before his power and might, to be agog, breathless, astonished at how surpassingly beautiful God is and how impossibly greater than yourself. This delicious encounter with the highest reality will that be the greatest moment of your existence past, present and future; when you come face to face for the first time with the majesty of God? Will that not be the first time in all of your life that all of your powers – intellectual, spiritual, emotional – are drunk up by a single sight, a single encounter, a single experience? You will find out what it was your life was meant for all this time. It is so transcending, this encounter with the majesty of God, the sense of the depth of his wisdom and the infinite reach of his power, John tells us in his first letter, that moment will simply change us forever. It will make us like God; at least as much as mere human creatures can be made like God, in purity, in goodness, in honesty, in truth.

Paul is telling us about the greatness, the majesty, the infinity of God; he is reminding us of how far, far above us God is, how little we can grasp of his divine being and life so that we will not quibble about the things that God may do and the choices he may have made. Who are we to

answer back to *this* God? We must bow our wills to his and must accept that there are many things in this life that we cannot and will never understand; even as we are assured that we can trust God to be true to his Word and always faithful to himself.

But it is precisely the greatness of God, his absolute sovereignty, his incomparable glory, his unsearchable wisdom *that attracts us to God*. What use is God if he is not truly a God worth our worship, a God who is far above us, a God who alone is capable of making and ruling over all things? And why should we worship a God who is so much less than that, so much less that we can understand him and his ways just fine, a divine figure huffing and puffing, trying to keep up, doing the best he can, while laughing his jolly laugh.

No, that is not the God who made this world or the God who rules it now. That is not the God who can save us from sin and death. That is not the God the sight of whose glory will be the complete fulfillment of every human heart and mind. We were made to live in the presence of a transcendent being, we have within us the potential for the experience of utter transcendence; but only the living God, the Creator and the Judge of all the earth, can satisfy that potential.

The true and living God is worth our fear, our love, our reverence, our faith, and our hope. But that God is so far beyond us that there is and could not possibly fail to be much about him and about his ways that we are incapable of understanding. The finite cannot comprehend the infinite. That's not a bad thing; that is a glorious thing. There is something, there is someone absolutely wonderful in every way who lies above, below, behind and before us and into whose hands we can confidently place our lives and our future and that of our children.

Soli Deo Gloria!