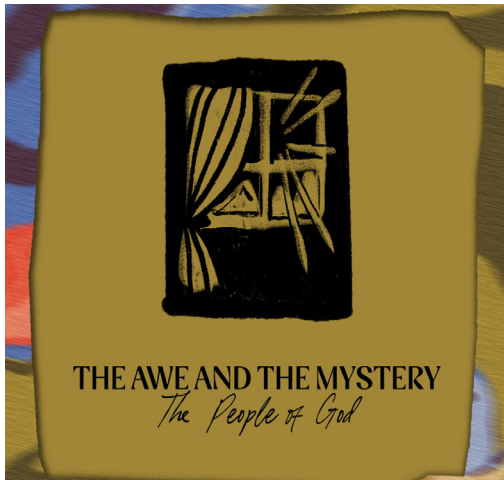




Sermon Growth Guide

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The Awe and the Mystery | Romans 11:25-36

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Key Verse: Romans 11:33 – “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”

Big Idea: God is worthy of worship even when His ways are beyond our understanding.

Foundations

Romans 11:25-36 brings Paul’s wrestling to worship. In the last three chapters, he has grieved over Israel’s rejection of Christ and wrestled with a painful question: If God’s covenant people have largely rejected the Messiah, can God still be trusted? Paul’s answer is not that every mystery becomes simple. His answer is that God has not failed, and His mercy is wider than we imagined.

The “mystery” is something God reveals that we could never discover on our own: Israel’s hardening is partial and temporary, and through it the gospel has gone to the nations. Jews and Gentiles alike are disobedient, but both are dependent on mercy. So Paul does not end by mastering or explaining God’s plan. He ends in awe: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!”

We all carry big “why” questions. And while God does not always give explanations, He does give Himself. Because He brought resurrection from the mystery of the cross, we can trust Him with the mysteries we still carry and respond, “To him be the glory forever! Amen!”

Understanding God’s Word

What question has Paul been wrestling with throughout Romans 9-11, and why is it more than an abstract theological issue for him?

In Romans 11:25, what does Paul mean by “mystery”? How do verses 30-32 show that both Jews and Gentiles are disobedient and both are dependent on God’s mercy?

What stands out to you about Paul’s shift from explanation to worship in verses 33-36?

Applying God’s Word

What “why” question are you carrying right now? Where are you tempted to demand that God explain Himself before you trust Him?

How might Romans 11:33 help you move from trying to manage the mystery to worshiping the God who meets you in it?

What would it look like this week to say, “From Him and through Him and to Him are all things,” over your “why” questions?

Witnessing God’s Word

Who around you is carrying heavy “why” questions? What might it look like to offer God’s presence, prayer, Scripture, or worship as a gift to someone who is struggling? Ask God for one opportunity this week to point another person toward the mercy and majesty of the God who is worthy of worship.

So very grateful to have had VBS last week! Loads of kids... loads of joy! One of the things I always enjoy are the questions that surface. And because I had the great privilege of stepping in as this year's Mission Engagement Man...(I'll just let you take that in for a second)... kids would see me, and they loved it BUT there were a LOT of questions - questions like, "Why is your hair blue?" or "Why are your pants so tight??" J Have you ever spent time with a kiddo who has discovered the word "why?" It seems that there is a season in every child's life when "why" becomes the favorite question. I certainly found that out last week!

Some of you parents or grandparents might relate to the grandfather who was spending the day with his young grandson, and the questions just started coming... "Grandpa, why is the sky blue?" The grandfather smiled and gave him the best answer he could. "Well, buddy, it has to do with the way light travels through the atmosphere. The blue light waves scatter in a way that makes the sky appear blue." The little boy thought for a moment. "Why?" Grandpa tried again. "Well, because light is made up of different colors, and each color behaves a little differently." The boy said - "Why?" They kept walking. The boy pipes up - "Grandpa, why do birds fly?" "Well, buddy, because God created them with wings and bodies that allow them to fly." The boy said - "Why?" They kept walking. "Grandpa, why do fish swim?" - "Buddy, because God made them to live in the water." "Why?" Finally, Grandpa reached the end of his wisdom and knowledge, smiled and said, "Buddy, look... some things are just bigger than we can understand. The little boy looked up at him and asked: "Why?"

We laugh because we've all been there, right parents, grandparents? Curious children believe every question deserves an answer. And in many ways, that curiosity is a gift from God: God created us with a desire to understand things, and with minds that wonder. But eventually, all of us discover something children have not yet learned: There are some questions that are just bigger than our ability to answer. And you know what? The questions don't end as we get older, do they? They just become bigger. The "why's" aren't so much about the sky or fish...they tend to become heavier: "Why did God allow this to

happen?" "Why did the diagnosis come back this way?" "Why did that relationship fall apart?" "Why hasn't my child returned to the Lord?" "Why did God answer that prayer but not this one?"

Many of us walk into worship carrying questions like these. And you know, the beautiful thing about Scripture is that God is not afraid of our questions. The Bible is filled with people who wrestled with God: The Psalms are loaded with them. Job asks questions. The prophets ask questions. And in the past three chapters of Romans 9-11, we find the Apostle Paul wrestling. And he's wrestling with one of the greatest questions imaginable... And the question is not simply: "Why have the Jews - God's chosen holy people—rejected Jesus?" The deeper question is this: "If God's chosen people, Israel, have largely rejected Christ, can we really trust God's promises?" I mean IF God made a promise to Abraham...IF God established a covenant with Israel...IF God promised to bless His people... then WHY have so many of God's own covenant people rejected their Messiah? Has something gone wrong in God's plan? Can God be trusted? That is the question Paul has been climbing through for three chapters.

And at the tail end of Romans 11, what Paul discovers is not that every mystery can be explained. What he does discover is this: God is worthy of worship even when His ways are beyond our understanding. That's where Paul is taking us today. Paul ends up on this summit of praise at the end of chapter 11... but two chapters back, in chapter 9... Paul - thinking about his own people, thinking about their rejection of the Messiah... he is grieved to the core. Paul is not a detached theologian cooped up in a library, trying to solve a puzzle. He loves his people! He's grieving, longing for them to know Christ! And His heart is broken. But even in his sorrow, Paul refuses to believe that God has failed or that his promises were broken. If there was a central message Paul is trying to get across throughout Romans 9-11 it is that God is faithful.

Romans 9 reminded us that salvation has never been about works, but has always been rooted in God's mercy. And his purposes have never depended on human achievement. They have always depended on His grace.

And yet, Romans 10 reminded us that human responsibility is real. We've got choices. Israel heard the message. Israel knew the promises. Israel even encountered in real time the Messiah himself. And yet many rejected Him.

Then we arrive at Romans 11, where Paul reveals what he calls a mystery.

Now— when you and I hear that word - “mystery,” we often think of something impossible to understand. Right? It's just this mystical thing that ends up frustrating us because mystery means we can't really know anything. “Well, it's just a mystery to me!” But in the New Testament, and certainly right here, a mystery is something God has revealed, but it's something that we could never have discovered on our own. That's the mystery Paul is talking about here. What's the mystery? Here's the beginning of it: A hardening – a hardness of heart toward God - has come upon Israel. Notice the words Paul chooses though. He didn't say “Israel has experienced a hardening “in full” or a total hardening.” The hardening isn't beyond partial. What does that mean? It means that God has not abandoned His people. There has always been a faithful remnant. Think of it: the apostles were Jewish. The first followers of Jesus were Jewish. Even Paul himself is evidence of that.

But the hardness of heart is also temporary. It's what Pastor Greg taught last week: God is not finished writing the story! There's a great purpose behind what's happening here: Through Israel's rejection, the gospel has gone to the nations. Through Israel's disobedience, God has extended mercy to the Gentiles — us. And Paul says that through this great mystery, God is bringing about His purposes. It's so unexpected! But it is not irrational. It's just that it's far greater than anything we would have imagined.

Now – this is good news for the Gentiles, Amen? But Paul doesn't stop here. He knows that grafted-in Gentiles, being ignorant of what's going on here could easily get conceited... and Paul doesn't want that! So here's where it gets even more mind-boggling and amazing. I'm going to read it slowly for us, so we can take seriously what Paul is saying. Gentiles and Jews – both disobedient. Both receivers of God's mercy. You know, if someone would've given me a pen, and said, “Go ahead and compose a plan for salvation history, I don't think I would have chosen this path. But that is exactly Paul's point: God's wisdom is deeper than ours. God's ways are higher than ours. God is always doing more than we can see, more than what we can understand.

Sometimes what feels like delay is actually preparation. Sometimes what looks like silence is actually God working in ways we cannot yet see. Sometimes the very thing we cannot understand, the very thing we can't wrap our minds around – that becomes the very place where we learn to trust. And after Paul climbs through these deep truths...after three chapters of wrestling...what he doesn't do is look around and say: “There! I finally have God figured it out! Now I understand everything!” No. What does he do? Paul simply breaks forth into worship! He goes on... All the searching and tracing... words about God's sovereignty, about Israel's disobedience, the Gentiles' disobedience, everything about salvation history and how all of it has given way to God showing off his immeasurable mercy to all... instead of concluding with another argument, he breaks forth into song! “Oh!” That is not the language of someone who has mastered the mystery. That is the language of someone who has been totally overwhelmed by the mercy and majesty of God. And isn't that what happens when we truly encounter God? The more we know Him, the more we realize there is still more of Him to know.

I tell you what: I experienced this personally through my own theological education. So grateful for the time I spent years back going to Fuller Theological Seminary... after three years of studying, and reading and writing (and barely surviving)... I came out on the other side with a degree that if you come into my office, you'll see it hanging on the wall. It's called an Mdiv— A “Masters of Divinity.” Ain't that great? Every time I look at it... I can't help but snicker. Because

“Masters of Divinity” is actually a pretty ambitious name for something that cannot be true! Isn't it? Nobody masters God! Especially Matt Holtzman! If anything, the deeper I have studied, the more convinced I have become that God is truly beyond my ability to fully comprehend. The goal of theology is not to shrink God down to the size of our understanding. The goal is to come to the end of our understanding, until we can't do anything else but fall on our knees in worship.

A.W. Tozer once wrote that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. Evelyn Underhill said that if God were small enough to be understood, He would not be big enough to be worshipped. A small view of God is gonna produce a small faith. A manageable God won't leave you in awe. But the God Paul describes here...A God whose wisdom is unsearchable...whose judgments are beyond tracing out...whose mercy and majesty stretches across generations past, present and future ...that God will cause us to worship! Paul goes on and reaches back into the Old Testament, quoting Isaiah. That is a humbling question. Who has ever given God advice? Who has ever improved His plan? Who has ever looked at God's purposes and said: “I think I have a better idea”? Well, we might try it... but God has never needed our wisdom. He has never needed our counsel.

Paul goes further back and echoes the book of Job. Now just leave that up for a moment. Here's a little refresher course on Job: Job suffered deeply. He lost his children. All of his possessions. His health. His understanding of life. And Job asked many of the same questions we ask. “Why?” “Where are You?” “How long?” warmth But when God finally responds, He does not give Job every explanation. Instead, He reveals Himself! And when that happens... Job's response is not: “Now I understand everything.” His response is that he spoke of things he did not understand, things too wonderful for him to know. And Job steps back from himself... and he questions who has ever given to

God that God should repay them. That is Romans 11. Not merely an arrival at an explanation... but an arrival in worship. And maybe that is where some of us need to arrive today. Because, if we're gonna be honest, sometimes we want God to give us answers... when what we need most is His presence. God does not always give us explanations. But He always gives us Himself. And in the end, that is the greater gift.

The greatest mystery in history was not fully explained. It was revealed. The cross. Who would have imagined that the King of Glory would save the world through suffering? But if He can bring resurrection from a cross... then we can trust Him with the mysteries we still carry. Paul reaches the final summit at the end of the chapter. From Him: Everything begins with God. Through Him: Everything is sustained by God. To Him: Everything returns to God. And therefore, everything belongs to God. Our questions... Our pain...Our future... Our entire lives... all of it belongs to Him.

And maybe that is where we need to leave today. Some of your questions might be answered with explanations – maybe. But the deepest questions are answered with worship. And that is why Romans 11 does not end with an air-tight, nicely-buttoned up conclusion. It ends with a song of worship from a man who is simply in awe of the mystery, caught up in the mercy and majesty of God.

As we close, I'm going to respond the way Paul responded. I want to close in worship. And if you'll allow me, I'm going to play and sing a song I wrote on this text...this is simply my own attempt to respond worshipfully in light of the awe and mystery of our great God. And as you listen, my prayer is that wherever you are today, whatever mystery you might be trying to manage... perhaps you can join Paul in surrendering to God and say, “Lord...from you, through you, and to you are all things. To you be the glory forever.