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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #47
January 23, 2022

rOH!mans
Romans 11:33-36

If you were to conduct a wide-ranging survey that asked, “What’s wrong with the Church in America?” I am quite certain that a variety of answers would be given. I have no intention of listing them all. Instead, I have one answer of my own. It may strike you as odd when you first hear it, but bear with me. The greatest problem in the contemporary church is that ***people are bored with God***. They aren’t so much offended with him or confused by him. They are simply bored.

Let me place that statement in the context of what we have before us in Romans 11:33-36. And I want to do it by directing your attention to the single most important word in this passage of Scripture. The most important word in Romans 11:33-36 isn’t “riches” or “wisdom” or “knowledge” or “glory” or even “God.” It is, perhaps, the least likely word to attract your attention. Yet, it is rich and powerful and radically lifechanging. It’s the first word in v. 33, ***“Oh!”*** That’s right, “Oh!” This is no insignificant particle. It is no mere transitional exclamation. This is the apostle’s passionate proclamation of the impact on his own soul of all that has preceded in his theological narrative.

I ask myself as I ask you: ***where is the “Oh!” in our response to God?*** Where is the intensity of awe and amazement that a true knowledge of the Holy One of Israel ought to evoke? The church has lost the “Oh!” in her relationship with and response to God. Do you want to know why so many believers are muddling through the Christian life, just trying to stay out of hell and to get by with as little discomfort and risk as possible? It is because when they think of God, instead of “Oh!”, their response is a “Who?” borne of ignorance, or the “Huh?” of disinterest, or a “So what?” of indifference.

If you’ll listen carefully, you may detect an odd sound echoing throughout many churches in our land and across the globe: Southern Baptist, Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Nazarene, Acts 29, non-denominational, charismatic, etc. Sadly, it isn’t the sound of heartfelt praise or of expository preaching. It is ***the rumbling sound of a spiritual snore that comes from religious boredom***. Professing Christians are, I’m sad to say, bored with God. That is why I’m committed, wherever I speak and in whatever I write, to awaken people to the excitement and fascination and indescribable life-changing power of knowing and experiencing the beauty and splendor of God.

Boredom with God is the reason people are in bondage to sin. One of Satan’s primary tactics is to convince us that God is a drag. And the church has contributed in its own way to this dismal image that God has among his people. We have trivialized God, having reduced him to moral irrelevancy. It’s not just that God seems unfathomable. For many, God is entirely unnecessary.

How different this is from the cry of the psalmist who, when he ran out of adjectives, resorted to interjections: “Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you” (Ps. 31:19a). David would have told us how good and great God is, if he could. But he can’t. “There are no measures,” said Spurgeon, “which can set forth the immeasurable greatness of Jehovah, who is goodness itself. . . Notes of exclamation suit us when words of explanation are of no avail. If we cannot measure, we can marvel; and though we may not calculate with accuracy, we can adore with fervency.”

So where did this apostolic “Oh!” come from and why is it so important that you and I feel it deep down in our spiritual bones? It assuredly must have come from Paul’s reflections and meditations on the truths of Romans 1-11. It had been building up in Paul for eleven chapters and finally burst forth in this hymn of adoration. As he ruminated on the magnificence of divine grace, the very fountain from which all

blessings flow, he could contain himself no longer. As he pondered the joy of forgiveness and justification and adoption and the gift of the Spirit and the mysteries of election and the purposes of God for Israel, Paul lost himself in wondrous praise. Oh!!

This “Oh!” that burst forth from the depths of his soul may well have been ignited by any number of passions. It may be the “Oh!” of *enchantment*, borne of his knowledge that he, like us, is the Bride of Christ. Could the holy one of God truly want to embrace *me* as his own? “Oh!” It may be the “Oh!” of *sheer excitement*, or perhaps *stunned disbelief*, as Paul asked himself, “Can all I’ve written really be true?” It may be the “Oh!” of *bewilderment* (how does one get a grip on God’s providence and his sovereign purposes for broken, sinful people? Do *you* understand Romans 9?). It may be the “Oh!” of *surprise* and *shock* (“Wow! I had no idea!”). It may be the “Oh!” of *amazement, wonder, and fascination*. It may be the “Oh!” of *yearning* for yet more of God’s presence and peace and joy. It may be the “Oh!” of *hunger and thirst*. It may be the “Oh!” of *urgency*, as the apostle cries out: “Oh, God! I’ve got to see you more clearly. Where can I find you? What must I do?”

Perhaps it is the “Oh!” of *awe and adoration*, as he tries to catch his breath when he contemplates who God is and what he has done. Or perhaps it’s the “Oh!” of *reverential fear*, as Paul asked himself, “How dare I sin against such a God as this?” It may be the “Oh!” of *submission*, in which a believer declares, “I’ll happily do whatever you ask of me.” It may be the “Oh!” of *joy and satisfaction* that declares, “How could I ever look to anyone or anything else when I have *this* God for *my* God?” It may be the “Oh!” of *comparison* and *contrast* (“He is truly incomparable. None can compare. Nothing can compete.”). Perhaps it is the “Oh!” of Paul’s *painful realization* of how utterly opposite he is from God when it comes to holiness (“Yet he loves me anyway!”). On any account, it is the “Oh!” that drives you to your knees in humility. It is the “Oh!” that energizes you to dance and shout and sing with happiness.

Synonyms!

Enjoying God sounds good, but it needs substance. There are many things in life that have the capacity to evoke a heartfelt “Oh!” from us. But my “Oh!” in response to an athletic move that leads to a touchdown for the Kansas City Chiefs is of a different sort from that which is awakened in me when I think about God. So, what exactly does it mean to relish and rejoice in Jesus? What words can I put to this “Oh!” that will give it meaning and power?

When I first began to explore this question, I experienced great frustration with the range of my vocabulary. Simply to speak of joy or delight or satisfaction struck me as hardly doing justice to the nature of our experience of God. There are intellectual and emotional dimensions to relishing God and rejoicing in the revelation of his glory that call for a variety of terms worthy of such an experience.

So I ransacked the dictionary looking for words that I hoped might elicit from your heart the response of spiritual intensity commensurate with the God whom we’ve been privileged to know. When the dictionary failed to deliver to my satisfaction, I turned to my Thesaurus. In the few years that have passed since I began this effort, I continue to sense the inadequacy of human language to articulate the joy for which we were fashioned. But here’s my best shot. This is what God intended when he created your heart and stamped his indelible image upon it. This is what is contained in that tiny word of heartfelt exclamation: “Oh!” You were made to be . . .

enchanted . . . enamored . . . engrossed with God
 enthralled . . . enraptured . . . entranced with God
 enravished . . . excited . . . enticed with God
 astonished . . . amazed . . . awed with God
 astounded . . . absorbed . . . agog with God
 beguiled and bedazzled
 startled and staggered
 smitten and stunned

stupified and spellbound
charmed and consumed
thrilled and thunderstruck
obsessed and preoccupied
intrigued and impassioned
overwhelmed and overwrought
gripped and rapt
enthused, and electrified
tantalized, mesmerized, and monopolized
fascinated, captivated, intoxicated, infatuated, and exhilarated . . . with God!

Does that sound like your life? Do you want it to? Or is your greatest struggle in the Christian life resisting the urge to yawn from boredom and lifelessness? Do you realize how difficult it would be to sin if this were true of you? This is what God made you for. There is an ineradicable, inescapable impulse in your spirit to experience the fullness of God in precisely this way . . . *and God put it there!*

All well and good, you say. But what does this have to do with holiness? What does this have to do with my struggle with sin? How does this affect my battle with temptation? How is it going to affect in a positive way my daily life? Why spend time and energy on the character and beauty of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and their work of saving grace?

The answer is easy. It is so that you will walk around spiritually dazed, with your mouth wide open and your eyes bulging from your head. Why? Because ***spiritually stunned people are not easily seduced by sin***. People in awe of God find sin less appealing. When you are dazzled by God it is hard to be duped by sin. When you are enthralled by his beauty it is hard to become enslaved to unrighteousness. People whose attention has been captured by the beauty of Christ and his saving love and mercy find little appeal in the glamour of this world.

A Lifechanging Illustration from Greek Mythology

Let me share an illustration with you that I've shared dozens of times both here at Bridgeway and at churches and in conferences around the world.

Paris, the prince of Troy, had stolen away Helen, the woman "whose face launched a thousand ships." She was the wife of Menelaus, the King of Greece. Menelaus, his brother Agamemnon, Achilles, and a man by the name of Ulysses, together with a mighty Greek army undertook the daunting task of recapturing her and restoring dignity to their beloved land.

To make a long story short, hidden in the belly of a huge Trojan horse, Ulysses and his men gained access to the city, slaughtered its inhabitants, and rescued the captive Helen. But the return voyage to Ithaca, which lasted nearly a decade, would prove to be far more challenging. People are intrigued by Ulysses' encounter with the witch Circe and his careful navigation between the treacherous Scylla and Charybdis. And who can forget his blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus, son of Poseidon, god of the seas?

My fascination, however, has always been with the infamous *Sirens*. The Sirens were demonic cannibals who disguised themselves as beautiful women and by means of their soothing songs lured unsuspecting sailors to the shore. Once near the island, their boats crashed on the hidden rocks lurking beneath the surface of the sea. These demonic cannibals wasted little time in savagely consuming their flesh.

Ulysses had been repeatedly warned about the Sirens and their lethal deceit. Upon reaching their island, he ordered his crew to put wax in their ears lest they be lured to their ultimate demise. He commanded them to look neither to the left nor right but to row for their lives. Ulysses had other plans for himself. He instructed his men to strap him to the mast of the ship, leaving his ears unplugged. "I want to hear their song. No matter what I say or do, don't untie me until we are safely at a distance from the island."

The songs of the Sirens were more than Ulysses' otherwise strong will could resist. He was utterly seduced by their sound and mesmerized by the promise of immediate gratification. One Siren even took on the form of Penelope, Ulysses' wife, seeking to lure him closer on the delusion that he had finally arrived home. Were it not for the ropes that held him tightly to the mast, Ulysses would have succumbed to their invitation. Although his hands were restrained, his heart was captivated by their beauty. Although his soul said Yes, the ropes prevented his indulgence. *His "No" was not the fruit of a spontaneous revulsion but the product of an external shackle.*

Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens, together with his strategy for resisting their appeal, is all too similar to the way many Christians try to live as followers of Jesus Christ. They struggle through life saying No to sin, not because their souls are ill-disposed to evil but because their hands have been shackled by the laws and rules imposed by an oppressive religious atmosphere. ***Their obedience is not the glad product of a transformed nature, but a reluctant conformity born of fear and shame.***

So, how do you account for your "obedience"? Is it the expression of your deepest heart-felt joy? Is it the product of a passion that spontaneously and urgently springs from the depths of your being? Or are you firmly bound to the mast of religious expectations, all the while yearning for the opposite of what you actually do? What is the most effective scheme for confronting the sinful sounds of Sirens?

Jason, like Ulysses, was himself a character of ancient mythology, perhaps best known for his pursuit of the famous Golden Fleece. Again, like Ulysses, he faced the temptation posed by the alluring songs of the Sirens. But his solution was of a different sort. Jason brought with him a man named Orpheus, the son of Oeager. Orpheus was a musician of incomparable talent, especially on the lyre and flute. When his music filled the air it had an enchanting effect on all who heard. There was not a lovelier or more melodious sound in all the ancient world.

When it came time, Jason declined to plug the ears of his crew. Neither did he strap himself to the mast to restrain his otherwise lustful yearning for whatever pleasures the Sirens might offer. But this was not the reckless decision of an arrogant heart. Jason had no illusions about the strength of his will or his capacity to be deceived. He was no less determined than Ulysses to resist the temptations of the Sirens. But he chose a different strategy. He ordered Orpheus to play his most beautiful and alluring songs. The Sirens didn't stand a chance! Notwithstanding their collective allure, Jason and his men paid no heed to the Sirens. They were not in the least inclined to succumb. Why? Was it that the Sirens had ceased to sing? Was it that they had lost their capacity to entice the human heart? Not at all. Jason and his men said No because ***they were captivated by a transcendent sound.*** The music of Orpheus was of an altogether different and exalted nature. Jason and his men said No to the sounds of the Sirens because they had heard something far more sublime. They had tasted something far sweeter. They had encountered something far more noble.

Ulysses may have *survived* the sounds of Sirens. But only Jason *triumphed* over them. Yes, both men "obeyed" (in a manner of speaking). Neither succumbed. Neither indulged his desires. Both men escaped the danger at hand. But only one was *changed*. Let me sum it up by saying this: ***The essence of loving living as a follower of Jesus isn't in trying harder but in enjoying more.*** I'm not saying you can change without trying. I'm saying that enjoyment empowers effort. Pleasure in God, fascination with God, excitement about God, is the power for purity.

The vice-grip the pleasure of sin exerts on the human soul will be broken only by trusting God's promise of superior pleasure in knowing Jesus. The only way to conquer one pleasure is with another, greater and more pleasing pleasure. Whether it's the sound of Sirens in ancient mythology or the all-too-real appeal of contemporary society, the principle is the same. ***Our only hope is in maximizing our pleasure in God and our fascination with him and all that he is for us in Jesus.***

These are the options. Like Ulysses, you can continue to fight against the restrictive influence of religious ropes and the binding power of fear, shame, and guilt, while your heart persists in yearning for what your hand is denied, or, like Jason (and Paul) you can shout a spontaneous and heartfelt “No!” to the sounds of Sirens because you've been captivated by the “Oh!” of fascination with God!

The only way to liberate the heart from servitude to the passing pleasure of sin is by cultivating a passion for the joy and delight of beholding the beauty of Jesus. What elevates the human soul and empowers it to live in the fullness of its created purpose is not religious intimidation or new rules or an anxiety induced by a spiritual scolding. It is fascination with the glory of God and all that he is for us in Jesus. “Oh!” People whose hearts are enthralled with the revelation of God’s greatness and grace turn a deaf ear to the sounds of Sirens. Why? Because they’ve heard a sweeter song.

Three Declarations, Three Rhetorical Questions, Three Doxological Assertions (vv. 33-36)

Three Declarations (v. 33)

(1) God's riches and wisdom and knowledge are infinitely deep

Therefore, you cannot supply God with something he lacks. The riches and wisdom and knowledge of God are bottomless. You can never study or look into the extent of God’s riches, wisdom, and knowledge and say: “I’ve reached the bottom. I’ve gone as far as can be gone. I’ve seen the extent. I’ve counted the final dollar that God owns. I’ve grasped the last bit of information that God knows.” No. Never.

God’s riches cannot be written down on a financial ledger. No calculator has enough numbers or space on its display to register all that God owns. Psalm 24:1 - “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” Deuteronomy 10:14 – “Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.” 1 Chronicles 29:11 – “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.” Every molecule in the far reaches of the galaxy belong to him.

Not only is God’s wealth infinite and unending, so too is his wisdom. God is never at a loss for a way to accomplish a purpose, a means to achieve an end, a pathway to reach a destination, an instrument to fulfill a goal. God never scratches his head, pondering which of two ways is most efficient to fulfill his desires. God never ponders diverse paths as if to suggest he doesn’t know instantly and exhaustively what is the best thing to do in the pursuit of his glory and our good.

Moreover, his knowledge is infinitely deep. Paul isn’t speaking here of our knowledge of God, as if to say that we will never exhaust all there is to know about God. That surely is true, but the knowledge of God here is God’s knowledge, the extent and depth and dimensions of what he, as God, knows. “Great is our Lord and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure” (Ps. 147:5)

(2) God's judgments are infinitely unsearchable

His ways and means of carrying out his eternal purpose are ultimately inscrutable, infinitely beyond the capacity of human minds to decipher or comprehend. Therefore, how dare we then judge him or call him to account or question his activities. The word “judgments” (*krima*) refers to his determination of guilt and innocence and whether, when, and how to respond: with immediate judgment? with longsuffering and patience? with saving mercy? All these determinations are beyond our ability to decipher or ultimately comprehend.

(3) God's ways are infinitely inscrutable

The word “ways” (*hodos*) refers to conduct, a way of life, decisions a person makes. This encompasses why a person thinks the way he/she does, feels, reasons, discriminates, decides, acts, chooses, and determines what means are best to achieve the greatest ends.

Why does God prevent one storm system from producing a killer tornado but permits it with another? Why does God spare one city but decimates another? Why does a righteous man die and a wicked one lives? Why does God prosper one person’s efforts in starting up a new business and permits another to fall into bankruptcy? Why does God elevate one world leader to a position of great prominence and humble another in defeat and disgrace? Why does one die of cancer and another is healed? God’s “ways” are simply beyond our feeble and finite and fallible capacity to understand. But of this we may be sure: He never does wrong. He never errs. He never regrets a decision he makes.

You and I can’t sneak a peek behind the curtain or look between the lines or peer into the darkness or gaze around the corner or explore underneath the carpet and ever expect to fully comprehend what God is doing. Give it up! You will only experience frustration. The only reasonable response to God’s unsearchable and inscrutable way of running the universe is faith and humble submission.

Three rhetorical questions (vv. 34-35)

(1) Who has ever figured out God's mind?

God himself has made this point in Isaiah 55. There he speaks to us and says: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9). This should serve to bridle our tongues when we arrogantly think that we can figure out God and his means and motives. We often say to one another, “I know what you’re thinking.” That is never possible with God, unless he has explicitly told us his thoughts in Scripture.

(2) Who has ever told God what to do?

God does not need advice on how to behave or counsel to extricate himself from difficult and ticklish situations. God never faces a conundrum for which he doesn’t have the perfect solution. With God there are no enigmas, puzzles, or mysteries. God never lacks sufficient wisdom to know how best to govern his universe.

Whatever we know about God and his ways and judgments and thought patterns is because he has graciously chosen to reveal it to us in Scripture (cf. Romans 1-11). But no one knows the mind of God in a way that he can become his counselor. The one thing that you and I want to do more than anything else, we can’t. ***We can never give God advice.*** We can never instruct him in the best way to run the universe. He doesn’t need our help. He doesn’t need our insights. How pompous and prideful of us to think that we are in a position to counsel God and provide him with guidance! See Isaiah 40:13-14.

(3) Who has ever made God his debtor?

If he is infinitely rich and owns everything, having made it all, what can humans possibly give him that they didn’t first receive from him? No one gives to God as if we originate or create things he otherwise does not or would not have. Our “giving” does not increase his inventory of goods and services and products and resources (cf. 1 Chron. 29:11). God owns it all. No matter how much Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg own, no matter how wealthy they become, they are penniless paupers compared with God. You can still enrich Gates or add to Tesla’s bank account, if only by a few dollars. Why? Because, as much as they own, they don’t own it all. But God does! Whatever you give to him he already gave to you! See 1 Chron. 29:12,14,16. Since God owns it all and therefore can’t be given anything that isn’t already his, you can’t put God in your debt. You can’t do anything that would result in God owing you anything!

Three doxological assertions (v. 36)

(1) All things are from God: He is the Source

(2) All things are through God: He is the Means

(3) All things are to God: He is the Goal

Everything that exists came “from him” and continues to exist “through him” as he exerts the power to sustain and preserve it in existence and everything ultimately is designed “for him”, i.e., to bring him honor and praise and majesty (11:36).

Note well: **FROM, THROUGH, TO!** This is Paul’s echo of what we see in Acts 17:24-25. All things come from him (“the God who made the world and everything in it”; 17:24a). All things continue to exist through him (“he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything”; 17:25b). All things ultimately exist for him or exist to bring him glory. What this means is “that there is no explanation for what *is* or what *happens* that is deeper or more decisive than God. This is what we mean when we say that God is absolutely sovereign” (Piper).

A Concluding Song of Praise

What is there left to say? Only this: ***“To him be glory forever. Amen!”***