

## **“The Providence of God”**

**Romans 11:33-36**

**September 17, 2023**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

We come today to the conclusion of the section of Paul’s letter to the Romans where he has dealt with the thorny problem of Jewish unbelief. Interestingly, it ends in worship. Paul has brought us along with him to climb this summit of the grace of God, and we have labored long and hard to reach this peak. It’s time to pause to admire the view, and we are inevitably drawn to worship.

It is striking to me that a passage that began with a problem ends in worship. So often, such thorny “God problems” end with anger and resentment of God instead of worship. This is commonly referred to as “the problem of evil.” If God is both all-powerful and loving, then what explains the existence of the many tragedies that are visited upon those living on this planet. Just in the last several weeks, we’ve read of the fires in Hawaii, a devastating earthquake in Morocco, floods in Libya and multiplied refugees from war-ravaged Sudan. And each of these has resulted in a massive loss of life. Many have offered this problem of evil as the reason for rejecting God. Others reject God because of disappointments of a more personal nature. Why, they might ask, does God allow this painful ailment to continue, a difficult marriage to remain difficult, or a challenging job to be the only option? In all of these cases, there is an unstated assumption that finds God deficient in his governing of his world. “If I were God, I could do a better job of running this world.”

There are many aspects of God’s running of his world that he doesn’t explain to us. But in the case of the problem of Jewish unbelief, God has taken the time to explain himself, an explanation that concluded with verse 32. **“For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”** God allowed a hardening to come upon Jews in order that mercy might extend to Gentiles. He will then bring revival to the Jews, with the result that a multitude from every tribe and people will magnify the mercy of God. With most problems, though, God doesn’t explain himself. But there is a doctrine of theology called the providence of God, and passages like Romans 11 explain God’s actions in a way that leads us to trust God and worship him even when we are not provided an explanation of why God has allowed something.

The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 27) defines God’s providence as *“the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly*

*hand.*” Let’s look now at how these final verses lead us to adoration of God and his providence in the face of life’s difficulties.

## **I. The Basis of God’s Providence – v. 33a**

The opening word of this verse, **“Oh,”** expresses amazement. When the explanations for God’s good governing of his world become known, all we can do is admire his goodness and wisdom. God has what it takes to govern his world well, and this first sentence lists three qualities possessed by God that result in his wise providence. All three are marked by a depth rather than a shallowness: riches, wisdom and knowledge.

When it says of God that his riches are deep, it is speaking of his power. Wealth brings power, both for God and for humans. Those with money can use their money for both influence and power. People with money can hire others to do things for them. They can direct and control as a result of wealth. So when it says that God has riches, it means that he has the necessary power to accomplish whatever he wills to be accomplished. His power is sufficient, but what about his wisdom? Does he use his power wisely?

God also has a depth of wisdom and knowledge. Wisdom is the skill and ability to put knowledge to good use. Let’s talk first about what God knows. He knows everything that actually happens, from the smallest detail of the universe to the most well-known. He also knows secret things, things that are hidden from everyone else. God knows our thoughts and our deepest motives and desires. He knows all things in the past, all things in the present, and all things in the future. There is nothing hidden from the eyes of God.

Even more astounding than God’s knowledge of all things actual, whether past, present or future, is the fact that God also knows all things hypothetical. He knows the “what ifs” of life. Have you ever wondered how your life might have changed if just one significant event in your past had been altered? What if you had been raised in a different city, had married someone else, had taken that job that was offered to you? It is impossible for us to know the answers to those questions, but not God. In Matthew 11, Jesus pronounces a curse on the city of Capernaum, where he had performed many miracles and done a significant amount of teaching. **“And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day”** (11:23). Jesus knew the hypothetical of what would have happened in Sodom had they witnessed his miracles and heard his teaching.

One of the implications of this is that with God there are never any unintended consequences. God will never have to say, “I didn’t see that coming.” The limits of human wisdom can be seen in the many examples of

unintended consequences that litter our history. There was the case of the British colonial government in India attempting to reduce the number of cobras in the nation by offering a bounty for every dead cobra brought to them. The unintended consequence occurred when the Indians began breeding cobras in order to then kill them and bring them in for the bounty, resulting in an increase of cobras. And then there is the well-known one-child policy that was enforced in China from 1980 to 2015. The unintended consequence was to produce a shortage of marriageable young women. Since Chinese couples preferred their one child to be a son instead of a daughter, large numbers of Chinese couples took the step of testing for the gender of the unborn baby and then choosing an abortion if it was a girl instead of a boy.

## II. The Inscrutability of God's Providence – v. 33b-35

The providence of God has an intricacy and complexity to it that is beyond our ability to fathom. The theological term for this, as well as the term used in our text, is the *inscrutability* of God. **“How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.”** The “judgments” of God is referring to God’s decisions, and Paul is saying that God’s decisions are beyond our ability to understand. His “ways” refers to the paths God chooses for accomplishing his work. In short, Paul is reminding us that God is so far above us in his wisdom and understanding that we will not be able to understand many of the things he does. Just as a two-year old can’t understand why mommy and daddy would take her to the doctor for those painful shots, so there is much about God we are incapable of understanding.

In verses 34-35, Paul compiles two Old Testament verses to ask three rhetorical questions. The verses are from Isaiah and Job. These questions reinforce this point of God’s inscrutability. There is no human being who has been made aware of God’s thinking. God doesn’t explain his secret plans to us. There is no one the Lord has consulted and asked for counsel. The irony of this is that there are plenty of people ready to criticize God for his decisions and his ways. Implicit in that criticism is the conviction that the critic could do a better job of running the world than God has done. A little bit of knowledge can sometimes be a dangerous thing, especially if the one possessing that limited knowledge thinks that they have the whole picture.

When our son, Matthew, was about five years old, we had a large group of church people over to our house. We were informed later that during this gathering our son had a group of adults around him in our backyard and was lecturing them about brain surgery. He had seen something on television about it and now regarded himself as something of an expert. Just as no one in their right mind would allow a five-year old to do brain surgery on them, to think that we have what it takes to run the world better than God is to be out of our minds. We don’t have the whole picture. There is far more that we don’t know

than what we do know, and it would not take any time at all for our decisions to wreak havoc on the world.

The application of this is to trust God even when things don't make sense to us. There are multiplied examples in the Bible of circumstances and events not making sense at first, only to turn out to be the plan of God to bring blessing to his people. Perhaps the story of Joseph is most well-known for this. Hated by his brothers because of the favoritism shown him by his father, they sold him to slave traders, and he ended up a slave to Egypt. Things went well for him in the house of Potiphar, eventually resulting in his being put in charge of everything. But then he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and found himself thrown into jail, where he stayed for many years. But God did not forget him. When the time was right, and only God knows when such times occur, he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and found himself ruler over all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. God used these tragedies to save not only Israel, but much of the world of that day from a massive drought and famine.

Another example from a different angle is that of Balaam. He was hired by a Moabite king to curse Israel. When he sets out to do so, the angel of the Lord comes to block his way with drawn sword. Balaam doesn't see the angel, but his donkey does and turns aside off the road in order to avoid the frightening angel. Balaam responds by beating the poor beast to get it to return to the road. Then the angel comes and positions himself in a narrow part of the path. The donkey presses against a side wall in order to avoid the angel's sword, pressing Balaam's foot against the wall in the process. Balaam sees none of this and beats his donkey again. A third time the angel stands in the way, and this time the donkey simply stops and lies down under Balaam, whereupon he is met with the same from his rider, who beats him with his staff. Miraculously, God gave voice to the donkey, who asked Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam answered, "You have made a fool of me." Finally, God opens Balaam's eyes, and he sees that the donkey he has been beating has actually saved his life. Perhaps the difficult circumstances you have been beating through complaints and bitterness are, through the providence of God, the thing that is saving you from far worse things.

It is the crucifixion of Jesus that is the best example of God's providence. The greatest injustice ever committed by the human race turns out to be the salvation of the human race.

### **III. The Goal of God's Providence – v. 36**

The final verse of the chapter tells us that the goal of all this is the glory of God. **"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be**

**glory forever. Amen.”** All things are *from* God, meaning that he is their author. All things are *through* God, meaning that he is the means by which all things happen. All things are *to* him, meaning that he is the goal of all things. All things come *from* God, *by* God and *for* God.

When we talk about the glory of God being the goal of all things, it is important that we understand that this is not because of a need within God. God has absolutely no need within himself to receive our praise. The command to glorify God springs from a need within us, not within God. We need to glorify God because that's what we were created for. The brokenness of the human race came about when this was reversed with the sin of Adam and Eve. Satan tempted them with the prospect that they could be as God, knowing good and evil.

This is still the matter before us when something bad happens. This brings us to the most fundamental aspect of life. Will we let God be God, or will we assert our right to define good and evil, to be as God ourselves? Will we say, “My kingdom come, my will be done,” or will we trust God's good providence? The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was in the middle of the garden, meaning that Adam and Eve passed by it multiple times each day. They were regularly confronted with the opportunity to experience the joy of paradise by saying, “God is God, and I am not.” Nothing has really changed. We too are presented with the opportunity throughout every day to let God be God. It happens most often when something unwanted happens. It could be something as simple as an inconsiderate or foolish driver who causes you a minor inconvenience. Will you say “My will be done,” and erupt in anger? Or will you let God be God? It could also be something far more serious—maybe a major health challenge, a rebellious child, or a friend at school betraying you. To trust the providence of God in such cases doesn't mean that we have to pretend it was okay. Remember that Jewish unbelief caused Paul “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (9:2). But when all was said and done, he worshiped God because of his wise providence.

## **CONCLUSION:**

As we close, I would like to invite you to think of a disappointment you have experienced in life. It could be something major or minor. Now I would invite you to take that hard providence and tell God that you trust him with it. You believe that he is good and he is wise. He is worthy of worship. The God who saved the world through the greatest disappointment ever, the death of God's Son, is wise and loving in all things.

## **Discussion Questions**

### **Romans 11:33-36**

1. Romans 9-11 begins with a problem (Jewish unbelief) and ends with worship. It is not unusual for things to take a different direction and for problems to lead to rejection of God. We call this the problem of evil. How would you respond to a friend who said that they want nothing to do with God because he doesn't act to put an end to tragedy and evil? In other words, they are rejecting God because of the problem of evil.
2. Review again the definition of God's providence stated in the Heidelberg Catechism. What strikes you about this definition?

*The providence of God is "the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand."*

3. Can you think of examples of unintended consequences of human decisions, either yours or those of others?
4. God never experiences unintended consequences from his actions and decisions because he knows all things both actual and hypothetical. What is a significant hypothetical action of yours, something you could have done but didn't? Perhaps it was marrying a different person, taking a job offer you turned down, etc. How might it help you trust God to realize that God knows this hypothetical and all others in your life?
5. Can you think of difficult circumstances in your life that God turned to good for you?
6. Are there difficult circumstances in your life currently where you need to trust the good providence of God?