

## **Sermon 135: Romans 11:33: The Deep Knowledge of God**

### **OUTLINE**

God's knowledge  
God's knowledge of sin  
God's knowledge of me

### **INTRODUCTION**

A W Pink in his book on the sovereignty of God writes: 'The god who is talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday school, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible conferences, is a figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form gods of wood and stone, while millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a god out of their carnal minds. In reality, they are but atheists, for there is no other possible alternative between an absolutely supreme God, and no God at all. A god whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to deity, and far from being a fit object of worship, merits nothing but contempt.' Or in regard to many Christian's thought about God, to quote Martin Luther, 'Your thoughts of God are too human.' Human thought is a procrustean bed that cuts God to fit our expectations. Or as the psalmist puts it in Ps. 50:21, 'you thought that I was one like yourself.' Paul confronts us with a God who breaks the bounds of our human expectation. Paul is confronted with profound mysteries and unknowables in God and this leads him to profound worship and consecration. Paul reminds us that we are not God, only He is and we are limited in our capacity to know God in His fullness. Paul sets before us three aspects of God's work that exceed our ability to comprehend or test, His knowledge, judgements and ways. As we work to worship God as Paul did we will be learning how to be humble in our pursuit of knowing God without despising knowledge and doctrine; how to worship with incomplete knowledge, and how to suffer ignorance about God without accusation.

### **God's knowlege**

Humility must be the foundational mark of all human thinking about God. We are sinners who have suffered what theologians have called the noetic effects of the fall, on top of the fact that we are creatures. As fallen creatures we cannot know all that we would like to know in the way we would like to know it. As physical we are limited by our flesh and cannot penetrate to the spiritual, as limited we cannot see the past or present, nor all of the infinite God. And our minds deliberately bend the truth about God. When it comes to thinking about God we are the most untrustworthy and should be highly suspicious of any 'experts.' As fallen creatures we are dependent upon God to reveal Himself to us. We cannot just see Him now, or put Him under the microscope, we are at His mercy and can only understand what He decides we can know. God has spoken to us in part in General revelation where we have some information about God, but it is limited in what it conveys. We can know there is a Creator, that He is powerful, wise and good. But nothing beyond that. For this reason we need a bible, a God breathed, reliable record kept for us that gives us information about our past, and futures, about the spiritual realm, about ourselves and most importantly about God. Yet the bible does not teach us all we would like to know, and nor can we know all that we would want about God. Paul highlights this about God's knowledge, 'Oh, the depths of the...knowledge of God.' As with God's gracious riches and wisdom here is a black hole to get lost in. Let us venture to the edge of this abyss.

A W Tozer has this well known summary of God's knowledge: 'God has never learned from anyone. God cannot learn. God could not at any time or in any manner receive into His mind knowledge that He did not possess and had not possessed from eternity, He would be imperfect and less than Himself. To think of a God who must sit at the feet of a teacher, even though that teacher be an archangel or a seraph, is to think of someone other than the Most High God, maker of heaven and earth...

God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every pluralities and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feelings, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible, in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven and hell...

Because God knows all things He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor (except when drawing men out for their own good) does He seek information or ask questions.<sup>1</sup>

What is in Paul's mind as he speaks about knowledge? Paul has just finished a prolonged discussion on God's election. He has just stated how God purposed an eternal plan that would ensure the full salvation of all His chosen, and this included choosing not only Jews but Gentiles as well to be saved from sin. Paul has spoken about a plan that reaches back into eternity past and stretches forward into eternity future and has in its bounds all the information about every person who would ever be created. This is part of what is causing Paul to roll back on his heels. His puny brain is overwhelmed at the infinite plan of God. Perhaps this doesn't impress you much because you live in the information age of 'Big Data.' In other words every day the world produces one billion gigabytes of new information. This should increase your amazement of God's knowledge for He knew it all already from the beginning.

### **God's knowledge of sin**

This is all quite abstract, I guess we should first talk about the elephant in the room whenever we talk about God's knowledge, and that is that God sees all our sins. God's omniscience equips Him to be the all knowing judge who is never without all the information necessary to determining our eternal destinies on judgement day. This is not a case of God being a cosmic peeping tom who looks into your bedroom and all the secret rooms of your mind. No, this is His world not ours, all the spaces are His spaces, all our faculties are His gifts; we live in His world in His invisible, omnipresence. Every Christian has had to reckon with the terrorizing notion of the all knowing God. Our consciences, that most abused part of ourselves have spoken to us of the many times we have sinned and violated His laws, it has spoken against us and our sins even when we have been able to put a self-righteous mask on our actions. God knows more than our dulled consciences make us aware of. In thinking of the all knowing God we are immediately laid bare for what we are. We are in our natures, incurably and fatally sinful with no hope in ourselves of curing the disease, or stopping the ceaseless flow of rebellious, perverted, selfish, sin. It is the work of the Spirit to impress upon us something of what God sees in us and how He feels about it, and this manifests as a deep sense of guilt and shame and a conviction that I am worthy of judgement. Our initial meeting with an all knowing God is a harrowing and revelatory experience. But it is all a preparation for us to see our deep need of a Saviour, the Saviour Jesus Christ whom God in His love provides. We come to feel our deep need of holiness and

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1 Boice, Psalms, Vol 3, p1202-3.

forgiveness and we see in Christ that God has fully provided for all our sins in Christ. Our deep sense of sin in being confronted with an all knowing God from whom we cannot hide sends us to hide away in the only refuge, Christ and His righteousness. The Father in His love has provided the Son as a way of dealing with the sins we have overwhelmingly come to feel.

### **God's knowledge of me**

But what about the Christian? We see that Paul is amazed at the knowledge of God, but this is not something that is abstract but which ought to move the heart to endless praise. Psalm 139 gives us a believer's appreciation for an all knowing God. This is a psalm of David, and a deep heart praise for the knowledge of God. This psalm is known for teaching the omniscience, the omnipresence and the omnipotence of God. These are big words for God being all knowing, all present, and all powerful. This psalm is a wonderful example then of the Christian meditating on those attributes of God where He is unlike us and instead of casting them off as abstract and impractical we see David deeply comforted by them and moved to a greater desire for holiness.

Notice firstly how the psalm begins and ends, the first thought in v1 is that the all knowing God has searched and known David, and v23-24 speak of David's desire to be searched and known in order to be holy. The whole psalm is in many ways an exploration of that first thought that an all knowing God has searched and known me. In a day where Peter Jackson has filmed Lord of the Rings we might think of the withering gaze of Sauron that Frodo cringes from in fear. Or in a day of 'Big Brother' we are wary of anything or anyone one having all the information about our lives and might want to run away or protest and apply the privacy act. David explores the great comfort a Christian has in this teaching.

The psalm divides up in the following way, v1-6 speak of God's omniscience. v7-12 of God's omnipresence, and v13-16 of God's power. v17-24 show David's response to these truths.

v1-6 David begins by speaking of God's knowledge about every part of his life. Sitting down; rising up; discern my thoughts from afar; my path; my lying down; all my ways and my words before I speak them. David is seeking to be all inclusive of his ways, thoughts and words whether waking or sleeping. Nothing is hidden from God. But for David who knows the character of God, His love and holiness, this is not creepy but comforting, v5-6, 'You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.' The surrounding presence of God is an assuring hand on David; the knowledge is wonderful; and he cannot wrap his mind around it. He finds the knowledge assuring not invasive.

Jesus applies the knowledge of God as implying the care of God. In Matt. 6:25-34 after Jesus has addressed the issue of the heart being divided between riches and God, He moves on to speak of another matter that affects us all, worry over life's basic necessities. Jesus gives us several reasons for why we should not worry.

Firstly, in the second half of verse 25 Jesus reminds us that life to God is worth more than the things that are needed to sustain it. And if God, who does provide all things, had to weigh up which is more valuable reason should teach us that God would put a higher value on our lives than on the food needed to keep it, and would provide the food we need to eat, and everything else that we need, in order to save our lives.

Secondly, Jesus uses the argument of the lesser to the greater. If God cares about the lesser creation then will he not care for you who are worth more than flowers and birds?

Jesus repeats this lesson twice firstly in reference to birds and secondly in reference to grass and flowers.

Fourthly, worry achieves nothing. Actually that is not true worry can produce ulcers, anxiety, stress, high blood pressure, etc. But it can do nothing constructive towards solving our problems.

Fifthly, only the Gentiles who are unsaved, and ignorant of the truth run around ruining their lives to try and increase their security. This is not behaviour that is fitting for those who have renounced money as an idol and have trusted God. But notice the end of verse 32, 'For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.' Jesus tells us that the Father knows and that is all He needs to say. The word Father makes all the difference to the knowing. He knows and because He loves us He cares. He is never indifferent, callous, or ignorant.

Sixthly, Jesus tells us that ultimately we will receive all these things. Naturally, Jesus is not saying we will get all the various riches that the world is chasing, but in this life and the next all our needs will be met.

Next in v7-12 David extrapolates on God's presence. God knows everything about my life because He is everywhere in it. David speaks now of the omnipresent God. He is one who is with me in ways no wife or child can be, even closer to me than my own body which cannot come with me into death. He begins this thought with a question in v7, 'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?' The highest place or the lowest place cannot escape His presence, v8. The farthest places from east to west are not far enough, v9. V10 then captures the believer's experience of God's pervasive presence, 'even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.' Leading and holding are the implications of our God who is all knowing and all present. If He is everywhere there is no place where He is not guiding my steps and there is no situation where He is not holding me and preserving me by His power. Nothing can hide us or separate us from Him v10-12.

In v13-16 we have God's all knowing, all present power personally active in our lives. David chooses to zero in on that part of God's activity that was going on in secret in his mother's womb, even before his mother realised she was pregnant, hence the description, 'in secret.' God was intimately and personally involved in creating our substance, personally choosing all our characteristics. Despite the obvious consequences of the fall that we all bear David can still say we are wonderfully made. His soul knows with a deep certainty the power and personal presence of God in his life and takes great comfort from it. We must not forget to emphasize that this text is a key text for why babies should not be aborted. Before his mother knew she was pregnant David was an individual being made by God. He was a person with a full story about his life already written. And for you philosophers out there who might want to ask whether an aborted baby would have any pages because God already knew they would be aborted, let me say that the pages of their new creation story were there not only their pages from this life. It is a wicked and evil sin to kill another human being fully grown or still forming.

David then responds to the amazing truth of God's knowledge, presence and power all active as a loving God on his behalf. David's response fall into three parts, and here is where we are really helped to apply the truth of God's knowledge in our own lives. Firstly I v16-17 we see David's awe and adoration, 'How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.' Try and put yourself in David's shoes here. He has just spoken about God knowing about every single day of his life from before he was born. David is thinking about the amount of information that God has about him. But he is not only

astounded at the amount of thoughts, 'How vast is the sum of them!' He is drawn to adoration, 'How precious to me are your thoughts, O God.' Think on it. God has thought about you more than any other person. In one sense you are always on His mind. But think of His thoughts, they are not merely the data collecting thoughts of an observer, they are the thoughts of the planner of our lives. His knowledge extends to the genetic level, to every day of our lives, and even into our eternal destiny with Him. He planned to love you in Christ, to save you, and to pour out eternal riches upon you as a prince in the house of a king. He planned eternity and all its pleasures and what your experience of them would be. He knew all we would do in sin against Him, but 'I awake, and I am still with you.' Do you feel what David is feeling, that he, even he should be the muse of this almighty, all present, all knowing God, and that I should be the object of His affection. Do you find them to be precious, are you amazed that after all God knows about you that He seeks to save you and have you for His own, extending the full armoury of His power, knowing and presence to you, sticking closer to you than a spouse, even your own body?

Next we have David's thoughts on those who hate this God who is so loving and attentive, v19-22. No doubt this section is always a shock to the system especially when so many emotions of love have been stirred. Many come to this section and think that David must be speaking as a sinner here, that this cannot be commendable and something that the OT Jews could use as Spirit inspired worship. There are several things we must say when reflecting on David's imprecations. Firstly, as a king who is to enact justice, David is filled with a righteous anger. Secondly, given David's task to cleanse the holy land where God dwelt of the seed of the Serpent, these sentiments are in keeping with the agenda of driving out the evil doers. Thirdly, David is also a type of Christ and in this section we must stop to consider that on judgement day when Christ comes to judge the world, sentiments of this nature, a righteous anger, not a sinful hatred will be God's emotions on that day. There is a day where we will speak of the wrath of the Lamb and it will be so terrible that men will beg mountains to fall on them instead of the weightier righteous anger of Christ. Fourthly, in the NT where we are not in the land of Israel and we are not called to arm ourselves and cleanse the land, we are called to fulfil the great commission. Our task is to take the sword of the Spirit into the world and see the unbeliever die with Christ and rise with Him in conversion.

David's third response is in v23-24, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!' David hates the sin not only in those who reject His loving God but in himself as well and seeks for his own heart to be holy, and to a pleasing sight in the eyes of one who knows all. Notice that although God already knows all David's thoughts, David invites the search. He is not fearful, he loves God and he genuinely wants God to help eradicate the sin that is in his heart. Notice secondly that David recognises that sinful actions all flow from a sinful heart and in order to get to the source of any problem we cannot change from the outside we need to guard and cleanse out hearts. We must keep sin out of our thoughts, out of our affections that drive our wills. Our hearts must be free from idols and God must reign unchallenged in the seat of our affections. Notice thirdly that David recognises the need for pure thoughts. Just as Jesus taught us we must be pure in heart, and even thoughts of anger, lust or coveting are sinful. David makes himself accountable not only for action but for thoughts as well. Fourthly, notice that David asks for any and every grievous way to be addressed and dealt with. Grievous could mean ways that lead to consequences of grief for David, but we must also include that David wants no thing in His heart that will grieve the Spirit of God. His thoughts are not first and foremost on his own safety but about pleasing the God who loves him so well. I find it interesting that David does not petition God to have the knowledge to read other people's minds, or to know how

to win the lottery, or to have the highest education. David seeks the knowledge of the all knowing God to help him to see if there is anything that is sinful and displeasing to the God who loves him, and seeks to draw on God's knowledge to please God not himself. In our day and age that is fixated on superpowers, alpha abilities, X-men, and other fantasy notions, David seeks only to have a clean heart before his holy and loving God. This is how we should respond to the deep knowledge of God.

This brings us back to what Paul was talking about in Rom. 11:33, 'Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!'