

The depth of the wisdom of God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 February 2014

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] Well you have Romans 11 open there. We looked at much of it last week and I'd like to bring that to a conclusion this morning.

! I'll tell you where I'm going. I'm going to verses 33, 34, 35, 36 in which Paul says, isn't God amazing? Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

That's where I'm heading to and I hope we can all arrive there in reasonable shape. So let's begin with some thoughts of praise and wonder. I don't know whether you ever see something on the telly or read a good book or see a movie in which you say, wow that was a great movie.

That was a brilliant story and you praise the writer or the producer and give them five stars out of five.

So I don't know what your tastes are. I don't know whether you watch Poirot or Columbo. I don't know whether you spell Columbo like that or whether no.

[1 : 23] But the detective Columbo, the one that goes, my wife, by the way, that one. And you think, you go all the way through and you think, he's so clever. He noticed that the cigarette was put left to right instead of right to left. Things like that. Poirot and his little grey cells.

Or I don't know if you've watched Oceans 11 or Oceans 12 or Oceans 13 and those sorts of thriller and there's a twist at the end and you think, how are they going to get out of that?

And then, wow, so clever. Never thought of that. Didn't see that coming. Or maybe you watch things like CSI or NCIS or things with various initials like that.

Or Silent Witness or Scott and Bailey, although that's a bit racy, Scott and Bailey. But you think, how are they going to catch that thief, that murderer, that nasty person?

It was, I can't remember her name now, who wrote Peter Whimsey? What was her name? Dorothy L. Sayers, who said that detective fiction is the most moral fiction of all because the whole point of it is that justice gets done.

[2 : 38] And I don't know whether you've ever read and watched detective things and you feel, get him, you know, he needs to be caught. And at the end, there's always that resolution that the person is caught. That's the way justice works and you think, wow, that was good.

Or maybe you watch Sherlock Holmes or read Sherlock Holmes. Holmes, what can you tell about this man? Well, I can tell very little, apart from the fact that his wife recently bought new toothpaste, that he's been to the barbers, that he's recently returned from Brazil, that he used to be a stamp collector.

Apart from that, I can tell very little. I don't know whether you've ever read Sherlock Holmes, that's the way it is, or seen it on the telly and you think, he's so clever. How does he manage to spot all that? Or I don't know whether you've watched things like Secret Millionaire, where somebody has a plan to do good to some people.

They don't realize it and it ends up that these people get given some amazing gift or something that they'd hoped for, but they couldn't possibly have afforded or managed.

And they get it and it brings tears to your eyes. Because you think, oh, that's so nice. Or Mr. Darcy, do you remember arranging? No, you probably don't. Arranging for the marriage of Mr. Wickham.

[4 : 02] And he did it all in secret. And the father says, as he reads the letter, somebody has arranged something behind the scenes.

It must have cost a lot of money. How will I ever pay them back? Because some act of generosity has been done. Do you remember the railway children? You see, I'm just drawing on things that I've read and seen and you may not know them at all.

There's an old gentleman in the railway children who sorts out the plight of the children's father who's been wrongly accused of something and he sorts it out and it's all right in the end.

All of those things you think, wow, oh, that's good. Or, wow, how clever. Or, oh, amazing. And God is all of those things and more.

And Paul says in Romans 11, wow, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. [5 : 08] How unsearchable his judgments, his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has ever been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? Things like that. That's what we're looking at. Let's recap the story so far in Romans 9, 10 and 11.

Paul has a number of purposes in writing these chapters, but the thing that is the most obvious feature is he's looking at this whole question of why and how it can be that Israel does not believe. How can that be? I mean, you could enlarge on that question and say, how is it anybody doesn't believe? What's going on? But the particular issue is, how is it that Israel doesn't believe? And you may remember we looked at things like this. She was given real, distinct privileges that no other nation or ethnic group has been given.

[6 : 21] They have the Hebrew scriptures. They have all sorts of background understanding of God that other people don't have. Israel has had the genuine free offer of the gospel.

And Paul was saying in Romans chapter 10, it's like the sunshine that shines on all people. Their voice has gone out into all the world. Their words to the ends of the earth.

Didn't they hear? Of course they did. The free offer of the gospel. But Israel, like all people, must take personal responsibility for their unbelief, for their pride.

They can't turn around to God and say, why have you made me like this? They are responsible for their pride. They're responsible for their unbelief as everyone else is.

And we add into that mix, as Paul does, there is the factor of God's way of working.

[7 : 22] He isn't running a competition to see who can achieve the highest grade. That would be a completely different way of doing it. He's saving people who don't deserve it as they put their trust in him.

And how does that all work? Well, it works by God's call and by his choice. And you might remember he said this in Romans chapter 9.

In order that God's purpose by election might stand, not by works, but by him who calls. He says that's the way God works. And as we begin to think about it, we begin to think, how do you fit all these together?

And we have to say God's method of working is actually amazing. And then we saw also the process of hardening.

Paul refers to this, the big example being Pharaoh, who was given opportunities to be compliant. But he said no, and then he said no, harder and stronger.

[8 : 25] And he was given more opportunities. And he said no, more definitely. And he became hard. And there is a sense that hardening, well, it's a process.

People, in a sense, harden their own hearts. But it could also be said God hardens people. And in chapter 11, verse 9, we looked at last week, David in his psalm says they've behaved so badly, they've rejected the king.

May their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see and their backs be bent forever. He says if they've rejected, well, may they become blind and deaf and stupid.

And that's one of the themes of these chapters, that Israel has become, like Pharaoh, or like the opponents of the king, has become hardened.

And then at the center of all of this is Jesus Christ. He's the stone over which people stumble. And he's the very center of salvation by grace.

[9 : 42] Through faith. Believing God's promises. Believing in what he offers. Believing in his son. Which is the complete opposite of working harder.

Trying harder. Being good. All of those things. God says you can't be saved that way. Nobody can be saved that way. If anybody's going to be saved, it's by putting their trust entirely in what I've done for them.

So that was part of the mix that we were looking at. And the question was, so is Israel, who rejected and messed up so badly, is Israel herself totally rejected?

We were having a little conversation after the service last week and saying, you know, what a terrible failure it was on Israel's part to have their own Messiah.

And they should have recognized him to be in conjunction with the Gentiles, but to be the people who said crucify him, crucify him. Pretty bad rejection.

[10:54] So is Israel herself totally rejected? That's what Paul says in chapter 11 verse 1. Did God reject his people?

And then he says in verse 11, did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? And he says, no. Here's an amazing thing. After having made such a mess of it, God still hasn't written these people off.

Encouragement for us. Because if people who did that are not written off, then those of us who say, well, I've stumbled and I've fallen and I should have known so much better.

But God offers hope. Well, if he offers hope to them, he offers hope to us. And what this is saying is about salvation. It's not talking about military power.

It's not talking about politics. It's not talking about geography. It's saying Jews also can be saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

[12:01] The door is not shut on them. And you remember that we looked at this last time. I'm still recapping. Paul said, is this true?

Can Jews be saved? Well, Paul says, yes, well, I'm a Jew. The Lord saved me. And then he looked back at what happened in the Old Testament when Elijah said, Elijah appealed to God against Israel, 11 verse 2.

And God had said in verse 4, I've reserved 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal. And he says, God kept a minority, a remnant of people just because he wanted to do that by grace.

And Paul says, that's true now. Verse 5, so there is at the present time, at the time of writing, there were Jews being saved.

A remnant chosen by grace. And then, still recapping. Paul was outlining the rather unexpected dynamic of blessing and salvation.

[13:23] And the first thing he says is, if I try and break it down for simplicity's sake, the hardening of the Jews led to blessing for the Gentiles.

So when Israel rejected, the gospel went ballistic and went off in all directions to all the nations.

When Israel rejected, the gospel went off to the Gentiles.

Paul himself says things like this, doesn't he? He went to the synagogue, they kicked him out, and he said, well in that case, I'm going to go to the Gentiles. First we've come to you, but you've rejected, we're going to go to the Gentiles.

So hardening in one place led to blessing somewhere else. And Paul had referred to this in verse 11, when he said, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles.

And he says in verse 12, their transgression means riches for the world. And then he says, their loss means riches for the Gentiles.

[14:26] So there's an unexpected thing. It is an unexpected thing. God's purposes going down through history, suddenly, pow, go ballistic into the whole world.

God's purposes going down through history. And it's the, this unexpected development. And then he says, there's more to it than that. That the conversion of the Gentiles leads to the jealousy of the Jews.

Now for the sake of time, I won't develop how this goes back into the Old Testament. Because in the Old Testament, or will I? Let me just see.

No, I think I haven't put this bit in. But in the Old Testament, there is quite a complex relationship between Israel and the nations around.

And putting it in a nutshell, Israel is meant to be a witness to the nations around. And she brings judgment to the nations around. And then in Deuteronomy 32 and around there, Moses says, but if you don't follow the Lord, then the nations will teach you lessons.

[15:38] You will be scattered amongst the nations. You will be oppressed by the nations. And they're going to teach you a lesson. And they'll make you indignant. They'll make you angry.

If you make me angry by serving other gods, I'll make you angry by sending you out to the nations. And that will have the effect of turning you back. Of course, that's what happened in the exile.

But Paul says it's actually happening now too. That as the blessing of the gospel goes to the Gentiles, that has the effect of making Israel angry or envious or jealous.

And that's what he says in verse 13. I'm talking to you Gentiles in as much as I am the apostle to the Gentiles. I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to

envy.

That's that word, envy, jealousy. Sort of in the same area as anger actually. So they might say, we want that. We need to. Why aren't we being blessed?

[16:38] And save some of them. So the conversion of the Gentiles leads to jealousy of the Jews. And then Paul says, there's actually even another step that is rather amazing.

That the conversion of the Jews is enrichment for the church. And Paul says, you know, you Gentiles, you've been blessed. But please don't think that you can somehow take credit for this. Because you've been built on the foundation of another people's experience. And you don't deserve this. And if they come in with their heritage, they bring you great enrichment.

So in verse 12 he says, if they come in, it brings great riches. And in verse 18 he says, don't boast over these branches.

If you do, consider this, you don't support the root. That's the root. Going back, God's dealings with Israel. The root supports you. So just think on that.

[17:41] He says, if you need comfort. And if you want somebody to say, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. Where do you have to go? You have to go to the Hebrew scriptures, don't you?

You have to go back to Israel's experience. Etc. And Paul says, don't resent when Jews are brought back into your congregation.

And you, Church of Rome, I know you're easily split with the Jews sitting on one side and the Gentiles sitting on the other. And you each think nasty things about each other. He says, just realize, Gentiles, that those Jews have a natural place in the Church of Jesus Christ.

They are the branches that were broken off so that you could be grafted in. But they could be grafted in too. And he says, and there's a warning here.

Because, verse 20, he says, they were broken off because of unbelief. And you stand by faith. So don't get puffed up and think, you know, we're doing better at this than the Israelites ever did.

[18:49] He says, don't you begin to think that. Because do not be arrogant, but be afraid. If God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. And it's a call to the Gentiles to be humble.

Be, as it says, actually, do not be arrogant. Be afraid. Do not boast over those branches. And if you're not going to boast over Israel, very few other people you could boast over.

So don't boast over your ethnicity and say, you know, I'm better Christian than those such and such people. Or those such and such people. None of us has the right to say that.

We're all saved by faith. We're all saved by grace. And none of us can look down on other people and say, well, I'm not like them. Well, they're not like me. You can't say that.

We're all sinners saved by grace. And none of us can look down on anybody else or sort of sit separately or something like that because we're all in it together.

[19:54] And that's the point that he's trying to make to the Romans. So that really just recaps what we've done previously.

So I hope I haven't lost you. But that's where we got to before. So I'm going to take us on in these last couple of paragraphs from verse 25.

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited. Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number or the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so shall all Israel be saved as it is written. And I want to give you the picture of what's happening there and pick out some words so that we can say, wow, how great God is.

Let's pick up this word mystery. I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers. What's a mystery? In the New Testament, a mystery is almost always a plan that's been hidden until the gospel is made known.

[21:15] It's usually, it's not a mystery in the sense of, you know, Jonathan Creek mystery. How did that person get killed inside that locked door or a magical puzzle?

You know, how could he have known what card I was going to choose, something like that. It's a mystery in the sense of a plan that was hidden but is now made known in the gospel.

So if you look in Romans 16.25, he says about mystery, 16.25. Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings.

He's saying this is a mystery. What's the mystery? The mystery is that who would have known how God was going to operate? Sending Jesus Christ as he did.

Dying on the cross as he did. Risen from the dead as he was. And then the gospel going out to the Gentiles. Who would have known that that's what God was going to do?

[22 : 32] It's a plan that God had but it was hidden. It was referred to but in a sense it was hidden and now it's been made known. It's a mystery you see. Look at Ephesians 3.6.

He says here's a mystery. A plan that was hidden and only becomes clear in the gospel. Ephesians 3.6.

Here's something you would never have guessed. Although actually it was predicted but how it was going to work out you would never have guessed. Ephesians 3.6.

Ephesians 3.6. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel. Members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. Who would have thought that God had in mind English people and Swiss people and German people to bring them into Jesus Christ.

[23 : 35] The mystery is that the Gentiles are heirs together. Let's go back to Romans 11. I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery. That's the sort of area he's talking about.

The things that were hidden and made known in Jesus Christ. He says I don't want you to be ignorant of this because otherwise you get puffed up. I don't want you to be conceited.

You have to learn this to make you humble. I'm conscious that the interpretation that I'm proceeding with is a bit controversial.

Look in some books they'll take it a different way. And let me say that sometimes some Christians take a different interpretation and they're very proud about it because they think that they've got it right.

I don't want to be proud about me thinking I've got it right. But what we're supposed to learn is humility. What we're supposed to learn is humility.

[24 : 43] So what does Paul say here about this mystery? Well I've got a little complicated diagram here. I put all the words on at one go which probably wasn't a good idea.

So here's the cross at the beginning and here's the end of time. When God has finished the work of salvation. And at the top of the diagram is the place of blessing and salvation.

And at the bottom of the diagram is the place of hardening and rejection. And as we enter the period before the cross it's the Jews who are in the place of blessing and salvation.

They're the people that God is focusing on to bless. And the Gentiles are completely out of it because God has overlooked them. He says I'm not obliged to them.

They carry on their own sweet way. They're very happy doing that. And I'm going to let them do it. But when the cross comes a strange and remarkable turn of events happens.

[25 : 49] That the Jews who reject Jesus Christ suddenly are catapulted into the place of hardening and rejection. They stumble very badly.

So I put a line, a red line saying the Jews have descended and fallen into the place of hardening and rejection. And the Gentiles who haven't done a single thing to deserve this.

Suddenly find themselves the focus of God's blessing and attention. And they're catapulted upwards into the place of blessing and salvation. And that's what Paul says.

Israel has experienced a hardening until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. So during this period, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

During this, Israel is hardened. But he does say in part. And that's his point. She's hardened in part. There are some who, by God's grace, move from this place of rejection up to the place of blessing.

[26 : 55] And I put some little dotted lines to show that. And he says, that's the mystery of it. You would never have guessed that, would you? That's how God is doing things in this day and age.

This is the mystery. Israel is hardened in part. And because of that and during it, the Gentiles come in.

And he says, and that's the whole thing. In this way, all Israel will be saved. Let's come to that in a moment.

Let's look at this word fullness, which crops up in a couple of places. It crops up in verse 12, the fullness of Israel.

And it crops up in verse 25, the fullness of the Gentiles. And I want to say this word fullness means the full number. The full number.

[27 : 56] It could be a big number. It could be a small number. It's just that it's the full number. So, as a big fullness, I'm quoting John 1.16, which says, from the fullness of his grace, we have received blessing after another.

That's the fullness of Jesus Christ. That's a huge fullness. In Mark 8.20, after the 5,000 have been fed, they go round with the baskets to pick up the scraps that are left over.

And the word is used, it's translated here, basketfuls. Mark 8.20, how many basketfuls, how many fullnesses did you pick up?

And they said, well, seven. So, in that case, the full number was actually quite small, but they were full. How many full baskets? Seven of them. So, the word fullness doesn't necessarily mean it's huge.

It just means it's full. And in Romans 11, I would like to put forward that there is a full number of Gentiles and that there is a full number of Jews.

[29 : 09] It doesn't necessarily mean they're just the full number. And I also want to look at the word until.

Verse 25. The word until means during this period of time.

It's the same word that's used about, in the famous expression at the Lord's table, do this until he come. All the time, all the way through, until you don't have to do it anymore at the end.

And here he's saying this is what happens until that time. There's a hardening. There's the bringing in of the Gentiles.

There's the addition of the Jews that God wants to be saved. And then I want to look at the word so. Verse 26.

[30 : 14] The word so means in this way. It's actually used a lot of times. I think 71 times in Romans.

I don't want you to read it as saying then. As in, and after this, a further different thing will happen afterwards.

If Paul wanted to say and then, he could have said and then. But what he says is and so, and thus. In the way, in other words, in the same way.

Or in the way I've been describing. You find that in 1131. Do we, do we find it in 1131? So too.

Verse 31. They too have become disobedient.

So they too have become disobedient. The so too is thus. Utos is the word in Greek. In this way.

And I want to say that he's describing this process.

[31 : 17] In the way I have described. All Israel will be saved. In other words. The process I've described will bring in the full number of the Gentiles.

And the process I have described will bring in the full number of Jewish people. That God wants to be saved. And in this way which nobody would have predicted. With such dynamics within it.

In this way. All the elect people will be saved. He'll bring in everybody. Through this process of hardening and reaction. And rejection.

And grace. And one lot of people working off another lot of people. And all of that. In this way. God will save Gentiles who've never deserved it.

And he'll save his own people. Who he promised he would save. So let's move to the next section. In verse 22.

[32 : 21] He says. Have you thought about God's goodness? And his sternness? Have you thought about that? God is good. And generous.

But he's also not a pushover. He's not soft. He says. And think about how this places the Jews. Because their situation is a particular one.

Verse 28. He says. As far as the gospel is concerned. They're enemies on your account. They are. They oppose the gospel. And they persecute Christians. But don't hate them for it.

Don't become anti-Semitic. Think back. Think of the age old promises. As far as election is concerned. They are loved on account of the patriarchs.

God had his eye on them. And knew how rubbish they would be. In the same way he knew what rubbish we would be. And he had his eye on them. And he hasn't changed his mind.

[33 : 21] In that sense. He hasn't said. Well I'm not interested in you anymore. No. He still has his eye. On Jewish people. To save them. By Jesus Christ.

By grace. On account of their history. They are loved.

And that history is not something that God regrets. That's rather what that word irrevocable means. His gifts and his call are not something God regrets. He doesn't say. Oh I wish I never had. No. He still has grace towards those people. And Paul says. Well where does this end up? Well it ends up this way. And it's rather a wonderful thing. Think about the Gentiles. That's you lot. Gentiles. Gentiles. Have always been rubbish. Gentiles have. They've got no idea about spiritual things. [34 : 22] They've. Been worshipping idols. And they are non-compliant. And disobedient. And unbelieving. That's Gentiles for you. Says Paul.

Which is most of us. And he says. What do you do with Gentiles? If you want to save them. You show them mercy. It's the only way to do it. You've got to show them mercy. Have you ever been shown mercy? Mercy is when you're speeding. The policeman pulls you over. And you know you're doing 40 miles an hour. And a 30 mile an hour limit. And you say to the police officer. Please can you show me mercy? Can you let me off? And the police officer says. Give me a good reason. And you say. I haven't got a good reason. Because if I had a good reason. I wouldn't be asking for mercy. What does God do to the Gentiles? He shows them mercy. And then think of the Jews. [35 : 21] Think of the Jews. Think of all their privileges. All their heritage. And yet. They rejected Christ.

Christ. And they've become. As non-compliant and disobedient. As unbelieving as the Gentiles were. That's where they are at. And what do you do with Jews then? You show them mercy. Are they allowed to say. But actually. We can earn our. We can earn our salvation. No. They've fallen so badly. The only thing they can say is. God give me mercy. And what a plan this is. See what it says. Just as you. Who were at one time. Disobedient to God. Have now received mercy. As a result of their disobedience. They too. [36 : 19] Have now become disobedient. In order that they too. May now receive mercy. As a result of God's mercy. To you. For God has bound.

All men over to disobedience. He's bound all men over to disobedience. He's shut them up. In the box marked disobedience. Gentiles. You're disobedient. That's where you are. And Jews. You're disobedient too. God has shut them all up. Into that box marked disobedience. In order that he may save. By mercy. Gentiles. Get mercy. Jews. Jews. Have no alternative. But to ask. For mercy. And Paul says. Isn't that amazing. God has shut. All in. To this position. Of non-compliance. So that all of them. Can be mercied. [37 : 19] Now I don't know. Whether I explained that very well. And I don't know. Whether I got the hang of all of it. As well as I. Could do. But I. Would like to say.

That the correct response. If we've understood any of it at all. Is to say. Wow. And Paul says. Oh. You know. I would never. In a million years. Have realized. That God's promises. Would work out that way. And even now. And I think of. People being hard. And people being called. And people coming in. And one nation. Doing this. And another nation. Doing that. I never realized. That God was at work. In all of that. Oh. The depth. Of the wisdom. And knowledge of God. How unsearchable. His judgments. He does judge. He does judge. His paths beyond tracing out. [38 : 19] Who would have realized. That that would lead to that. And that would lead to that. Who has known. The mind of the Lord. Who has God rung up. If he couldn't do 50-50.

He'd done phone a friend. Bit stuck on this plan of salvation. Could I get some help. From somebody please. Who has God ever rung up. And said. I'm a bit stuck. On the plan of salvation. Absolutely nobody. Who could have given him advice. Nobody. Who has known. The mind of the Lord. Or who has been his counselor. And then. The way it all works out. Who can at the end. Say. Well there you are you see. I knew I'd be saved. Because. You know. God owed me that. You know. He owes me a favor. God does. Who can. The whole plan. Means that nobody can ever say. I've given to God. And God needs to pay me back. Nobody can say that. [39 : 13] And who. Gets the glory for it. Who. Comes. When we get to the end. And all's done and dusted. Who can say. There we are.

What a great job I've done of that. Only one person. God. Only God.
Can say. Look what I've done. Look what I've done with rubbish. These rubbish people. Look what I've. Look how I called them. Look how I brought them.
Look how I looked after them. Look how I saved them. Look how I paid the whole thing for them. Look at the surprise on their faces. Look at the joy in their hearts. When they finally arrived. Look they could hardly believe it. I've done all that. Says God. I've done all that. And Paul says. Because. From him.
[40 : 07] And through him. And to him. Are all things. And to him be the glory. Forever. And Paul doesn't say wow.
He says amen. Amen. So I'm going to say amen as well. Amen.