Title: Soli Deo Gloria {text Romans 11.33-36}

Series: Reformation Solas

Scriptures: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Romans 11:25-36

Do you know what the word ‘glory’ means?

A dictionary definition of ‘glory’ is “praise, honour, or distinction extended by common consent”

Examples of everyday usage in the world would be:

1. As a young soldier he dreamed of winning military glory.
2. The glory of the town is its large and ornate fountain.
3. The new owners are trying to restore the company to its former glory.

As Christians we read, sing and say the word frequently because it is such a central theme of the Bible – a truth which was recovered 500 years ago at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

“Glory” in the OT is associated with value, riches, splendour and dignity, majesty and awe.

Preacher and author John Piper has defined God**’s** glory as *‘the beauty and greatness of his manifold perfections’.*

We see this in Scripture when the prophet Isaiah has a vision of God, sitting on a throne in the temple with seraphim who call out to one another (Isa 6:3)

"*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!*"

The glory of God is His, and His alone.

He says through the prophet Isaiah (48.11b) “*My glory I will not give to another*”.

In the Holy Scriptures, God has revealed in His work of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone for His glory alone

However, the Roman Catholic Church taught, and still officially teaches, **a sharing in God’s glory,** proclaiming that

1. we are saved by the merits of Christ, **and** our own good works **and the** merits of the saints.
2. we approach God through Christ **and the** saints, who together with Mary, intercede for us.

Therefore the glory for a sinner's salvation is, in Roman Catholic theology, to be attributed partly to Christ, partly to Mary and the saints, and partly to the sinner himself.

**That is - God’s glory revealed in salvation is to be shared with others**

Whereas, in contrast, the Reformers read the Scriptures and it was clear to them that:

1. Salvation is entirely of God and has been accomplished by God’s work alone
2. The main goal of God’s salvation of a chosen people is for His glory alone

That is the meaning of the fifth Reformation slogan in Latin ‘Soli Deo Gloria’ translated: “to the glory of God alone”.

This phrase conveys such a key truth of the Bible that many sermons could readily be preached on this topic, but here today is just one!

Key figures in church history including Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther came to assured faith through reading Paul’s letter to the Romans…

Here we focus on our text in this epistle – from Romans 11.33-36 in which Paul gives glory to God alone:

1. **Three exclamations which glorify God (v33)**

Real estate agents often talk of a property having the ‘wow factor’ –

That is a ‘striking or impressive feature’ – perhaps a new bathroom, a well-crafted kitchen or an expansive view…

In v33 Paul begins with an expression of awe with a single letter ‘O’ – he has been struck by the incredibly impressive plan of God for the salvation of His people: both Jews and Gentiles…

**Have you experienced the ‘wow’ factor** when looking on the beauty, majesty, scale and complexity of an aspect of God’s creation – this universe? Perhaps the milky way at night, the intricacy of a honey bee, the kaleidoscope of colours in a sunset?

**Have you experienced the ‘wow’ factor** when the grace and goodness of God jump out at you from the pages of Scripture? –perhaps during your personal devotions, in a Bible study, or whilst listening to a soul-stirring sermon. {pause}

The Apostle Paul has been writing to 1st century Roman Christians about the gospel of which he was not ashamed – ‘*for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*’ – he pens (Rom 1.16)

He writes about salvation by faith alone (Rom 1.17), justification by faith which brings us peace with God (5.1), freedom from condemnation in Christ (8:1) and then in chapters 9-11 the mysteries of God’s sovereign election - **of some, but not of others**.

The decree of God in His plan of salvation has the greatest ‘Wow factor’ of anything to those who believe…Paul writes:

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*

*How unsearchable are his judgments*

*and how inscrutable his ways!*

The parallel structure of these three statements, combined with three questions in v34-35 and three declarations in v36 indicate that these verses at the end of chapter 11 form a **hymn of praise.**

Look at verse 33:

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*

The word depth (bathos) here is the root of our English word ‘**bathymetry**’ – the science of measuring the depth of the ocean

In this verse it conveys the idea of the **inexhaustible magnitude** of God’s grace towards undeserving sinners.

That is the wonder of salvation by faith alone, apart from any works which we can do:

The Apostle Paul writes earlier in this letter:

**“***For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame*." {Romans 10:10-11}.

2ndly in v33 there is the unsearchable/unfathomable nature of God’s sovereign work of election:

*How unsearchable are his judgments*

God saves some, but not others. Of the twins born to Isaac and Rebecca, God loves the younger Jacob, but hates the older Esau (Rom 9.13).

Is this not unfair? No. God has every right to choose to whom he will be merciful and to whom he will extend compassion (9.15).

All the descendants of Adam are undeserving of **any** favour from God – all have turned aside, every one – no exceptions (3.12).

Who then are we to question why God saves some and not others?

Are we not all like clay in the hands of a potter, completely under his sovereign control?

The word ‘unsearchable’ ([anexereunetos](http://www.preceptaustin.org/romans_1133-36" \l "unsearchable)) in our text literally means "not searched out" and thus it signifies that which is impossible to search out, completely comprehend - fully understand.

Job, who experienced the judgements of God, despite being a ‘blameless and upright man’, one who ‘feared God and turned away from evil’ (Job 1.1) declared to his less-than-helpful ‘friends’:

"*As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause,* ***who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things*** *without number*” (Job 5.8)

Here Job glorifies God **in the midst** of his suffering, distress and perplexity.

God’s ways are completely just, they are inscrutable!

That’s what Paul writes in his third exclamation:

*and how inscrutable his ways!*

The word ‘inscrutable’ ([anexichniastos](http://www.preceptaustin.org/romans_1133-36" \l "unfathomable)**)** here means that which cannot be traced out, which is past finding out and thus that which is impossible to fully comprehend.

This word is sometimes translated (NASB) ‘unfathomable’.

It is true that we can ‘plumb’ the depths of God’s plans and purposes.

The Lord has given us His Word so that we can undertake such helpful and beneficial investigations.

If we are to understand anything of God’s wondrous works of salvation, then we **must** study and learn from what He has revealed in His Word.

However, to use an illustration from bathymetry - as it used to be practiced with a sounding line. The depth of shallower water near the coast could be measured by lowering a line over the side of a boat with a lead weight at the end.

Deeper, offshore water, which was too deep to be fathomed by a hand line was referred to as ‘out or soundings’, or ‘off soundings’

Now sonic depth finders can penetrate to the deepest ocean trench – the Marianus Trench in the Pacific ocean which is almost 11kms (10,994m) below sea level at it’s deepest point (Challenger Deep).

Unsearchable and inscrutable are parallel words conveying the same idea here in our text.

That God providentially controls salvation history in a way which is beyond human understanding..we cannot plumb the depths of God’s decrees, his hidden plan and will that he has not chosen to reveal to us.

He has not given us the equivalent of a sonic depth finder to get to the bottom of his will – as if finite creatures could ever do so with our gloriously infinite God…

So questions necessarily remain:

**Why** did he start with the Jews as a chosen people and not with the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, or the Jebusites or some other people group?

**Why** did God chose a partial hardening of Israel until the full number of the elect of Israel would be gathered?

**Why** have some of your wider family members come to saving faith, whilst perhaps others either have not as yet or gave no evidence of having done so before they died?

**Why** does God choose to save some, but not others?

The answers to these questions are too deep for us.. we cannot fathom them, our human ‘sounding line’ is too short…

Are there then no questions that we should ask? {pause}

Most certainly not! …which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Three questions which glorify God (v34-35)**

When I ask a question from the pulpit –

Like the one I started with “*Do you know what the word ‘glory’ means?*”

It is **always** rhetorical..

That means…it doesn’t require a verbal response from you!

The purpose is for you to think about the answer in your head!

Incidentally the reason why Biblical preachers do not enter into a conversation/dialogue with the congregation they are preaching to is because the Scriptures uses a very specific word for public preaching (e.g. 2 Tim 4:2)

This word means to ‘proclaim’ or ‘herald’.

It was used in the ancient world of an official whose duty it was to proclaim loudly and extensively the coming of an earthly king.

The Imperial Herald would enter a town in behalf of the Emperor, and make a public proclamation of the message which his Sovereign ordered him to give, doing so with such formality, gravity, and authority as to emphasize that the message must be heeded!

The herald was not entering into a conversation with the people.

So questions not requiring or expecting an answer have a place in preaching, they also have a place in the Paul’s hymn of praise..

Look at verses 34&35 where he asks three rhetorical questions:\

*"For who has known the mind of the Lord,*

*or who has been his counselor?*

*Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"*

- the first two loosely follow Isaiah 40.13, the 3rd, Isaiah 41.3

Let’s look at each one in turn:

**For who has known the mind of the Lord** – answer ‘nobody’!

No human being can understand the detail of what God is doing in the world in the mysteries of His perfect providence.

In his gospel, John records Jesus passing by a man who had been blind from birth (John 9.1-3). His disciples look for the answer as to why this man could not see. Who was responsible for his plight? Himself, or his parents?

Jesus answered, "*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him*”. God was glorified when Jesus healed this man and declared “I am the light of the world”.

Why did God allow Adam to fall into sin? - answer - that the works of God might be displayed in him

Why did God decide to credit Abraham’s faith to him as righteousness? (Rom 4:3) – answer - that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Why did chose to adopt sinners saved by grace into His family? – answer - that the works of God might be displayed in us

We cannot answer these questions in any great detail, but we can say in a ‘big picture’ sense – so that God may be glorified …that ‘*the beauty and greatness of his manifold perfections’* might be seen..

Here is the 2nd rhetorical question in v34:

**Or who has been his counselor?** – answer ‘nobody’!

He is the source of all wisdom. He does not consult with anyone.

He is not guided or corrected by anyone.

He is perfect in knowing all, understanding all, always acting with perfect righteousness.

He is God and God alone, there is none like Him!

**Why do some people** come to know Christ, and others never do?

**Why do some people** enjoy good health, and others suffer painfully throughout their lives?

**Why do some people** enjoy peace whilst others live through wars?

I am not God’s counselor, I do not know His whole will, neither do you or any of us…

We simply don’t know the answer to these questions…

Paul writes to the Romans about God’s sovereign election of some to eternal life and the objection which might be raised: “Is there injustice on God’s part” (Rom 9.14)

He says ‘*But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"*’ (Rom 9.20)

Here is the 3rd rhetorical question in v35:

**Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?** – answer ‘nobody’-

We can earn absolutely no credit with God so that He is in our debt.

Everything, without exception, we received from Him.

All that we have, including our very selves, are gifts from God.

It is out of His abundant grace that He gives and gives and gives.

We see his gifts of adoption, an inheritance and the Holy Spirit in the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians:

*He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,* ***to the praise of his glorious grace*** (1:5-6)

“*In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be* ***to the praise of his glory***” (1.11-12)

*In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it,* ***to the praise of his glory***(1-13-14)

Notice that the highest purpose in God’s works of salvation is …’for the praise of his glory’.

The truth that God’s glory is his highest goal does not necessarily sit well with people like you and me. We may silently ask ourselves rhetorical questions such as these:

“*Isn’t it a bit* ***self-centered*** *of God, wanting to be praised, always desiring to be glorified?*”

“*Isn’t it* ***unloving*** *for God not to want to share his glory with us?*”

**“***Isn’t it* ***unjust*** *for God to desire for Himself to be exalted?*”

The answer to all these questions is ‘most certainly not!’ – we’ll see why in our 3rd point:

1. **Three declarations which glorify God (v36)**

There are many, many questions which we can have about why God has acted the way He has in the past, why his providence runs the way it does in the present, and why he has decreed the future as He has.

We find these questions surfacing from His own people through the pages of Scripture, especially in the psalms:

“Why, O LORD, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” {Ps 10.1}

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? {Ps 13.1}

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” (Ps 22.1)

These psalms of lament almost always (exception Ps 88) end with declarations of who God is and of what He has done. {pause}

This is what we see in three declarations made in v36 of our text:

“*For from him*

*and through him*

*and to him are all things*”

As Creator God alone is the source of everything visible and invisible (e.g. Heb 11.3). He is the **means** by which everything came into being and He actively sustains all that He has made . He Himself is the ultimate goal of all things. He has always been, and whatever else exists, owes its being completely to him and so we can add nothing to him which is not already flowing from him.

That is the consequence of God being the Creator and not a creature. Therefore, God’s zeal to seek his own glory and to be praised by men **cannot be** owing to his need to compensate for some weakness or address some deficiency. He has none, absolutely none.

However, when creatures like you and I seek our own glory we are likely to be trying to make ourselves seem greater than we actually are.

3 verses after the end of our text (Rom 12.3), the Scriptures warn us: not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought’.

However God, unlike you and me, cannot think more highly of Himself than He ought – He is infinitely high, far, far above all His creatures in glory.

In 1 Cor 13.5 we read that “love does not insist on its own way”

Is God then unloving in seeking glory for Himself?

Let me ask you, what could God give to us to show us the extent of His perfect love?

It’s not quite the right question…**who** could God give us?

The answer is Himself!

"*For God so loved the world, that* ***he gave his only Son****, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3.16)

God gave us Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ!

C.S. Lewis wrote: “*The world rings with praise – lovers praise their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praise the countryside. We praise what we appreciate and enjoy whether it be children, flowers, mountains, or rare stamps*.”

So God seeking praise for Himself is the ultimate act of love, because He has given to us His own Son for our enjoyment, our delight, our eternal pleasure, so that we can praise the Great Giver.

The deep connection between glorifying God and finding our joy in Him is wonderfully expressed in WSCQ&A1:

*What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.*

The glory of God has now been revealed in Jesus Christ:

“*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his* ***glory, glory*** *as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” {John 1.14}

It is **not unjust** for God to desire to be exalted because He is worthy of all honour and praise as Creator.

In the words of the 24 elders before the throne of God in heaven:

"*Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created*." {Rev 4.11}

God the Father is glorified by Jesus Christ His Son who was willing to serve and suffer for the Father’s glory

That is why Jesus Christ Himself is worthy of all praise:

*"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"* {Rev 5.12}

It is not unjust for God to desire to be exalted. He is worthy of all honour and praise because He has redeemed His creation and a people for Himself through the person and work of His Son.

Our goal, as those uniquely made in His image, is to be the same as God’s goal - to glorify Him.

That’s what Paul does at the end of chapter 11 of his letter to the Romans ending with

“To him be glory forever. Amen”

To use a Latin phrase, we are to live our lives ‘Corem Deo’ – before the face of God.

Glorifying Him every moment of our existence. In the words of 1 Corinthians 10.31:

“*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*”.

As the Protestant Reformers would say ”Soli Deo Gloria”.

Amen