

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 22, 2015

Going Toward God

Romans 11:25-36

I want to begin today's sermon by picking up where we left off during last Sunday's fellowship lunch. I'm not referring to what was remaining of the food, though I do know that James and Ann Hess went away from this place with a huge pot of leftover spaghetti. In this case, though, I'm referring to the song we used at the beginning of our meal. We usually call it "the Doxology." Join me as we sing it again (Congregation sings "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow").

"Praise God, from whom all blessings flow." Those words are just as appropriate in 2015 as they were in 1674 when they were written by Thomas Ken, a priest in the Church of England. His composition serves us well throughout the year, but especially as we approach Thanksgiving Day. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

Thomas Ken certainly wasn't the first person to get doxological, to break into praise to God. We hear Paul doing the same thing at the end of today's Scripture passage from Romans. After three chapters of wrestling with the reality that most of the people who had received the gospel and taken their place in the church's pews were Gentiles rather than his fellow Jews, Paul brings his argument to a close. He doesn't cap things off with a PowerPoint slide summarizing his findings. He doesn't produce one more set of data in order to cinch his case. He doesn't even say, "Here, in conclusion, is my point, in one sentence." Instead, he breaks into song, and invites his hearers to join him in a hymn of praise. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (v. 33).

Notice that Paul's lyrics don't aim to prove the existence of God or to wrap up, in a neat and tidy package, the divine plan of salvation. Paul knows that he doesn't have all the answers and that he can't explain, in five minutes or less, the inner workings of the Lord. On the contrary, his doxology is full of words about the bigness of God's purposes and the boundaries of human understanding. God's wisdom and knowledge are too deep for humans to plumb. God's decisions about the world and about humankind are too complex for humans to figure out. God's detailed strategy for restoring justice and peace to his creation is too mysterious for humans to grasp.

Not that we're completely in the dark. After all, Paul does talk, at other points in some of his letters, about God's revelation of his will and purpose for humankind and for the world. In other words, the mystery has been unveiled. Through Jesus Christ, God has made known, fully and decisively, his plan to reconcile the world to himself and to bring all things under his saving sovereignty. In Christ, God has demonstrated his faithfulness and trustworthiness, assuring us of his holy love and guaranteeing us that what he has begun he will see through to completion.

But according to Paul, precisely how God will finish what he has started is beyond human comprehension. That's why Paul mixes some Scripture into his song of praise. He cites Isaiah, his favorite prophet: "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" (v. 34). Then he tosses in a little bit of Job: "Who has ever given to God, that

God should repay him?” (v. 35). Remember that Job, as much as any book in the Bible, wrestles deeply and intensely with the problem of God’s righteousness and human suffering. So Paul draws upon this part of the Old Testament to remind his hearers, then and now, that God is in no one’s debt. We aren’t here to advise God or to supply him with what he needs to accomplish his will. Our call is to trust in the trustworthiness of God.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things” (v. 36a). Paul begins wrapping up his doxology by acknowledging that God is the source and origin of all, the provider and sustainer of all, and the end or goal of all. Everything in the created universe exists in absolute dependence on the power, wisdom, and mercy of God. That’s the bedrock of reality that we all need to remember as we prepare for Thanksgiving. Our lives need to be built on gratitude to the creating and saving God revealed in Jesus Christ. In fact, at the beginning of Romans, Paul said that our lost and broken condition, our sinfulness, is rooted in our failure to recognize God for who and what he is, to glorify him, and to thank him. Our rebellion and ingratitude plunges our hearts and minds into idolatry. We worship and serve things that can’t give life, things that can’t save.

So part of what Paul is doing in his doxology is inviting us to join in the music and to relate to God the way that we’re supposed to relate to God, with thankfulness for his wisdom and mercy. After all, mercy toward all, the restoration of humankind, and the restoration of all things, is God’s ultimate objective. That’s what Paul sees happening in the way that God has used Israel’s unbelief to bring Gentiles to faith in Christ, and how God will eventually use the faith of Gentiles to bring many of Paul’s fellow Jews to faith in Christ. Somehow, somehow, God actively works, in ways that we humans can’t fully comprehend, to bring his world-wide, cosmic-wide purposes to a triumphant conclusion. “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (v. 36).

When you actualize God’s mercy in your life and experience God’s saving power through faith in Jesus Christ, you commit yourself to living in reliance on God’s faithfulness and sovereignty. You grow more fully into what you do know and understand of the will of God revealed in Jesus, while also living faithfully within the limits of what you don’t fully know and understand. And we all know that there’s plenty of that. Plenty that puzzles us, confuses us, disappoints us, frustrates us, and sometimes angers us, about God’s ways, God’s timing, and God’s strategy. “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

But just because we can’t always get inside God’s head, or dare to advise him on what to do, doesn’t mean that we can’t live gratefully, with assurance that he knows what he’s doing, and that the ultimate outcome is for our good and his glory. Didn’t Paul already testify to this near the end of Romans 8, just before he starts wrestling with how Israel, his spiritual kin, have resisted and rejected the gospel? After reflecting on the reality of present suffering and the hope of future glory, Paul declares, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (8:28).

Loving the God who has demonstrated through his Son that he loves us, and living thankfully as we go in the direction of this God’s purposes. That’s not just a once-a-year thing that we do this Thursday. It’s an every day way of growing into our calling in Christ. It’s learning how to walk gratefully, during both seasons of blessedness and times of brokenness. Catholic priest Henri Nouwen has reflected on what it means to be grateful for everything. He writes:

To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives—the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections—that requires hard

spiritual work. Still, we are only truly grateful people when we can say “thank you” to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for. Let’s not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now and trust that we will soon see in it the guiding hand of a loving God.¹

Whether he’s looking at the micro level of his own personal life or the macro level of unfolding history, Paul sees in them both the guiding hand of a loving God, a God who refuses to abandon his creation to be destroyed by the power of sin and the consequences of human disobedience.

Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Great Britain, has always been known as a deeply religious man, willing to express his faith and voice his devotion. His longtime press secretary and advisor, Alistair Campbell, remembers an episode in 1996 when Blair was visiting a school in Scotland where a gunman had killed 16 children and a teacher. There in the bloodstained classroom, Campbell asked Tony Blair, “What does your God make of this?” Blair stopped and replied, “Just because man is bad, it does not mean that God is not good.”²

No doubt there were many times in Paul’s ministry when he didn’t feel like breaking into a hymn of praise like the one in today’s text. But whether he is singing or silent, Paul never surrenders his fundamental conviction that God is righteous, faithful, and trustworthy, and that in the end, his goodness will not fail. What one person says of the psalmists carries over into Paul’s vision too: “What prevails in the end is the unshakeable faith in their bones, whatever the fate of their flesh, that underlying all is goodness, beyond human understanding but deserving of human trust: a goodness not only worth clinging to when all else fails, but more precious by far than anything else one might desire.”³

“God is good all the time. All the time God is good.” That’s part of a popular chorus sung in many churches. It’s also an expression repeated by lots of Christians, especially when it looks like we’ve gotten some kind of blessing. There’s certainly a great deal of truth in this acclamation. We do believe in God’s fundamental goodness, across time, in all circumstances. But part of what that means is that we have to be prepared to claim this expression when things are falling apart, and not just when things are going our way. In fact, according to today’s text, what ultimately matters is whether we, in the full sweep of our lives, are going God’s way. Whether in success or failure, joy or sorrow, the goal, says Paul, is to be going toward God.

And one of the things that will help get you there is gratitude. There was a saying among the rabbis: “In the future, all sacrifices will cease, but the offering of thanks will not cease to all eternity.”⁴ Our gathering here today is part of that ceaseless offering of thanks. And where you find people thanking God, you’ll find people blessing God and praising God. “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!” Or as Eugene Peterson renders it:

Everything comes from him;
Everything happens through him;
Everything ends up in him.
Always glory! Always praise!
Yes. Yes. Yes.⁵

Let’s close by adding our voices as we once again sing “the Doxology” (Congregation sings).

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (New York: HarperOne, 1996) 12.

² Michael Elliott, “Tony Blair’s Leap of Faith.” *Time Magazine* (June 9, 2008) 34.

³ Stephen Westerholm, *Understanding Paul: The Early Christian Worldview of the Letter to the Romans*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 33.

⁴ Quoted by Fred B. Craddock, "Preaching About Giving Thanks—Giving God Thanks and Praise." In *Preaching In and Out of Season*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Neely Dixon McCarter (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 124.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 328.