Romans 11:33-36 *The 5 Solas: Soli Deo Gloria*

***Luther, Martin Luther***For the last several weeks I have been telling you stories about Martin Luther. Today is our final week in the Solas series, so today I will also wrap up Luther’s story.

Martin Luther lived a colorful life, to say the least. There are parts of his life that almost make him look like a Medieval James Bond.

For instance, when we last left his story Luther had just made his defiant refusal to recant before the emperor at the humorously named Diet of Worms. The result was the Edict of Worms, which declared Luther an outlaw, banned his literature, and required his arrest. It made it a crime for anyone to give Luther food or shelter, and permitted anyone to kill him without legal consequence.

Luther had been guaranteed safe travel to and from the assembly, but that was clearly now in doubt. And, as a matter of fact, as he returned home he was set upon and abducted. As it turned out, however, his abduction had been pre-arranged; and his abductors were the men of his supporter the Elector Frederick who were disguised as highway robbers. They whisked Luther away to Wartburg Castle where he stayed in seclusion for 10 months. While there he often wore a wig and dressed as a knight, referring to himself as “Sir George.” During this period he also became the first to translate the New Testament into German.

While he was in seclusion, Luther’s powerful ideas continued to roam the countryside, winning converts. Among other things, Luther called for nuns to flee their convent confines and encouraged marriage by those who were called to be clergy. And so, when a group of local nuns wrote to him in 1523 to ask for help; he arranged for a local merchant to help smuggle 12 of them out of their cloister inside empty fish barrels.

These former nuns almost immediately became Luther’s responsibility, and over the next 2 years he helped arrange marriages or homes for all but one of them. A bright, feisty, red-haired woman named Katharina Von Bora was engaged to a former monk, but it fell through. She then boldly declared she would marry no one but Martin Luther himself.

On June 13, 1525 they were engaged in the afternoon and married by evening. Martin was 41. Katie (as she would be known) was 26. For a long time, Martin had vowed to remain single, even as he encouraged other clergy to marry, because he expected to be killed at any moment. It is also clear he married her more out of pity than love.

For her part, it is unlikely that Katie saw particularly good husband material in Martin either. He was reportedly a slovenly bachelor with a middle school student’s fascination with gross out humor. He was also terrible with numbers and struggled to keep his finances in order. Her biographer has written: “He was a brilliant man and a household name when Katie married him…but she reportedly said that she would change him to be more to her liking — and she did.”

In spite of the unusual beginning, it is clear that the Luthers grew to love each other, and their marriage became a model for what modern Christian family-life could look like. Luther frequently referred to her as “my Lord Katie” and he trusted her completely to manage his business and household affairs. They raised 6 children and enjoyed a boisterous family table that was open to guests, and included family devotions, board games, and music. It is clear that Katie became Martin’s most trusted confidante, and when he died he named her his sole heir, even though women were not legally allowed to inherit at the time.

Luther was not perfect, however. As much as I have enjoyed telling stories about his larger-than-life personality, I must also acknowledge his flaws. I’ve already mentioned that he had a sharp tongue and an acid pen. While it can be fun to read some of his more creative insults, it should be pointed out that his inflammatory rhetoric had real consequences. The issues Luther was involved in were leading to wars and heresy trials that could result in death. When he insulted someone violently in print, that often resulted in real violence in the world.

Most regrettably, Luther said many harsh and bitter things about the Jewish people. These sentiments reflected the anti-Semitism of the time; but did nothing to stem it or change it. Even more disturbing, these statements of Luther were frequently quoted favorably 400 years later by those who engineered the Holocaust.

Luther was not perfect. He was a sinner living among sinful people. And it is important to keep that in mind about all our heroes.

But the reason Luther’s legacy endures today, and the reason we have been talking about him for the last 5 weeks, is because of what he did in helping Christians recover an understanding of salvation. This understanding is summarized in the doctrines of grace—the 5 Latin phrases all containing the word **sola**—which did not originate with Luther but which are considered an effective summary of Reformation Theology.

I think this understanding of salvation is well summed up in **this quote from Luther:**

“God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel pleasure and work of Another – God alone.” *– Martin Luther*

The heart of Reformation theology is that salvation is utterly beyond our powers and depends absolutely on God alone. That’s the idea captured in our final sola: ***Soli Deo Gloria***. To God alone be the glory. The credit in salvation goes to God alone.

***Oh!***Our text today comes from **Romans** **11:33-36.** Romans 11:33-36. If you have a Bible, or Bible-accessing device, you can turn there. And we’ll put it on the screen. Not many verses, here’s what it says:

33Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
    How unsearchable his judgments,
    and his paths beyond tracing out!
34“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
    Or who has been his counselor?”
35“Who has ever given to God,
    that God should repay them?”
36For from him and through him and for him are all things.
    To him be the glory forever! Amen.

This is a passage known as a doxology. A doxology is a short-hymn of praise to God. We have a song known as “The Doxology” (“Praise Him from whom all blessings flow…”); but really any short outburst of praise can be known as a doxology. “Doxology” comes from the Greek word for glory. So it literally it means to give God glory.

And the thing that is so interesting about this doxology is where it is found. This is the middle of the book of Romans. Romans is Paul’s longest and most complex book in the Bible. For the first 11 chapters Paul has been explaining the good news of salvation, the treasure of God’s grace and the beauty of justification of faith in almost painstaking detail. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 are some of the most challenging in the Bible as Paul takes on the mystery of God’s sovereign choice in election.

Remember last week when we saw that the Apostle Peter said that he sometimes found Paul difficult to understand? I think he was probably referring to the first 11 chapters of Romans when he said that. It’s heady stuff!

Beginning in chapter 12 Paul is going to start applying the gospel to everyday life. He’s going to give the “so what?” of all this careful theology; the implications of what Jesus has done for us in the way we live our lives.

But before he gets to that, he stops and breaks out in spontaneous worship. Good theology leads to doxology. The clearer we grasp what God has done the stronger the urge to worship Him for it. That’s what is happening in these verses.

Notice how the passage starts: “Oh!” That’s not a translation. That’s the exact word in Greek as well as in English. The letter Omega. “O!” I’m guessing that little sound means pretty much the same thing in any language. It’s an exclamation. A catching of breath. A way of saying “Wow! This is amazing!”

I was reminded this week of a conversation our worship leader Craig Cannon and I had when he came to visit and interview for the job. I picked him up at the airport in Minneapolis and as we drove back we talked about the church and music and the kinds of songs we sing here. And one of the things I told him was that we don’t sing songs with the word “oh” in them.

What I meant is that we don’t sing songs that have lines where basically all we are singing is “ohhh” or some other sound. There are songs like that out there, and some of them are very good, but to me they seem more appropriate for concerts or arena venues. They just don’t seem to fit our church. We try to pick songs where the words we sing have content, not just noise.

So I told him we don’t sing songs with the word “oh” in them… except when we do. Because there are songs—the great hymn “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” for example--that use that little word “oh’ to express wonder and awe, like Paul does here.

Another example would be the song we’ve sung the last 5 weeks as our theme song for this series: “Christ be Magnified.” When we get to the chorus we sing: “Oh! Christ be magnified!” I think of that “oh” being similar to Paul’s “oh”. In the verses we are singing about the wonder of Christ and His eminence and the beauty of His creation and then we just need to break out in praise! Oh! Christ be magnified! We don’t sing songs with “oh” in them, except when we do.

That’s what’s happening in this passage. Paul is being stopped short by all of the wonder and beauty he sees in God and he just can’t help himself. He has to stop and worship. He has to stop and give God glory.

There are three things Paul praises God for in this passage. We’ll see, first, that God’s wisdom is unfathomable. Second, God’s existence is unrivaled. And, third, God’s glory is ultimate.

***The Depth***First, **God’s wisdom is unfathomable.** Paul’s praise here is not focused on those parts of God which He does understand, but rather those parts of God that He doesn’t understand.  God’s wisdom is unfathomable. This is **verse 33**:

33Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
    How unsearchable his judgments,
    and his paths beyond tracing out!

“Depths” is a great word. Unfathomable is basically a word in English which has to do with depth. A fathom is a unit of measure for describing the depths of the ocean. So if something is said to be unfathomable it means it is measureless. You can go down and own into the depths and never hit bottom. There is no limit to the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

It’s interesting that Paul chose the word “depths.” He could have said: “Oh the heights of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” That would be an equally true statement. We could go soaring in our exploration of God’s wisdom. There is no ceiling or cap to it either.

But Paul chose the word depths. Maybe because going down implies foundations. Depths implies roots. It is what we build on top of. When we are looking for the truth upon which to build our lives, there is no firmer foundation than God. There is no explanation beneath God. No matter how deep you go, there is only God.

But the grammatical weight here is not on the noun, “depths,” it’s on the modifiers. The riches of wisdom and knowledge. In other words it isn’t that God is deep, but rather that His riches of wisdom are of such a different kind, and His knowledge so vast, that it far exceeds anything you or I could even imagine.

John Piper writes this:

Paul says that God’s knowledge is unfathomably deep. He knows all recorded facts — all the facts stored in all the computers and all the books in all the libraries in the world. But vastly more than that, he knows all events at the macro level — all that happens on earth and in the atmosphere and in all the farthest reaches of space in every galaxy and star and planet. And all events at the micro level — all that happens in molecules and atoms and electrons and protons and neutrons and quarks. He knows all their movements and every location and every condition of every particle of the universe at every nano-second of time. And he knows all events that happen in human minds and wills — all volitional and emotional and spiritual events — all thoughts and choices and feelings…

And Paul says that not only God’s knowledge but also God’s wisdom is unfathomably deep. God is infinitely wise. That is, he has always been able to conceive and carry out plans that have good goals and that make use of all that knowledge to bring to pass what he purposes. He knows how to use all the facts of the universe and guide all the events of the universe to achieve the best end, namely, the display of the fullness of his glory magnified in the white-hot worship of a blood-bought people. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-deep-riches-and-wisdom-and-knowledge-of-god>

And, specifically, this wisdom and knowledge is on display in the salvation plan that Paul has just spent the last 11 chapters so carefully laying out. Where is God’s wisdom and knowledge best seen? It’s in His plan to save sinners by grace alone, through the application of faith alone, placed in the work of Jesus Christ His Son alone.

As Paul has said in other places, no other wisdom would have devised such a plan. No earthly knowledge would have conceived of such a radical move by the God of the universe as to send His Son as the redeeming sacrifice for sinners; with the application of this sacrifice made simply by faith placed in this Son; with no expectation of merit or works performed by those being saved, but instead a salvation granted entirely by grace.

This is the truth that makes us Christians. This is the truth that we celebrate and sing about week after week. We come back to church every Sunday and we talk about the incredible riches of God’s grace, and yet we will never fully plumb the depths of this amazing plan.

The next two phrases convey the same idea:

    How unsearchable his judgments,
    and his paths beyond tracing out!

Unsearchable means impossible to get your mind around. Human imagination can’t capture or explain how and why God does what He does, because His judgments are unsearchable.

And his paths beyond tracing out. At some point the mind of God becomes footprints that a hunter can no longer tack. You are on the trail for a little bit, and then whatever you were following went across the river. You lost it.

God has revealed enough that we can truly know Him. God has revealed enough that we can know how to be saved. God has revealed enough for us to revel and rejoice in His salvation.

But, at some point, we have to admit that it is simply too much for us. It is beyond our ability to fully comprehend. It is a richness of depth and knowledge we will spend the rest of eternity exploring and marveling over.

***Who is Like our God?***This brings us to the second thing Paul is praising in this doxology: **God’s existence is unconditioned.** Paul wants to remind us that we exist for God, rather than God existing for us. **Verses 34-35:**

34“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
    Or who has been his counselor?”
35“Who has ever given to God,
    that God should repay them?”

Paul quotes two Old Testament verses here. Verse 34 comes from Isaiah 40. Verse 35 comes from Job 41.

Isaiah 40 is a chapter about the unrivaled supremacy of God. Isaiah asks a bunch of rhetorical questions about the God who measures the water in His hands and holds the dust of the earth in a basket. It’s where most of the lyrics in the song “Behold Our God” come from. You might recognize the line: “Who has given counsel to the Lord?” from verse 34 here.

The whole point is that there is no other god like our God. The useless idols of the nations cannot compare to the God who created the world. The dumb and mute pieces of wood and stone cannot compare to the God who plans and achieves our salvation.

In particular, we need to focus on the idea that anybody could teach God anything. Everything we do—from talking to walking to driving a car to performing complex mathematical equations—everything we do is something we had to learn from someone else. We needed somebody telling us to “say ‘Mama’” and we needed somebody to hold our hands as we toddled across the floor for the first time. But God cannot relate to that. God never needed a teacher. He never needed an adviser. He never had to consult with anyone.

And yet, the world is filled with would be God-advisers. Too often, people tell God outright or by implication: “I don’t like the way you are running the world. I don’t think it is fair of God to do things this way. I don’t think God should allow these sorts of things to happen. If I were God, I would do it different!”

The world is filled with would be God–advisers. The one thing Paul explicitly says we cannot give, and dare not give, is what proud sinners most often give: they tell God how He should run the world, and warn Him that if he doesn’t run it their way they won’t believe in Him. As if that were a threat to God!

Then, the next verse is a quote from Job 41. Job 41:11. It’s a part of God’s speech at the end of Job where God essentially explains to Job that no human is in a position to question God’s governance of the universe. God asks: “Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me.”

The point is: If God already owns everything then there is nothing in the universe that you could give to Him with any expectation that He should pay you back. Why should He repay if it already belonged to Him anyway?

We can never put him in our debt. There is absolutely no negotiating with God. We have no bargaining position. We are utterly owned and we are squatters on his territory. Every breath we take is a gift. Every virtue we perform is grace.

And so, we need to get away from the notion that God exists for us. That somehow God is there to serve us or please us. We need to see that we exist for God, and every blessing we receive from Him is a tremendous act of grace.

God doesn’t owe anyone anything. Even sending Christ, although an expression of His divine love and mercy and compassion, wasn’t because He was so desperate at the notion of losing us, but was a free and sovereign choice on His part.

God’s existence is unconditioned. We depend on Him. He does not depend on us.

***From Him, Through Him, and For Him***Third thing Paul praises God for: **God’s glory is unshared**. Paul wants us to know that all the glory—all the glory in salvation and all the glory in the world—belongs to God and to God alone. **Verse 36:**

36For from him and through him and for him are all things.
    To him be the glory forever! Amen.

There are three prepositions in the first line of this verse. Prepositions help us to get spatial awareness. They help us to locate two items in relation to one another. Pay attention to the prepositional phrases: “from him,” “through him,” and “for him.”

First, Paul says all things come “from him.” All things come from God. That means God is the beginning, or the source of all things. All things have the origin in God. If you were drawing it, you could draw an arrow from God out into the world. All things are from Him.

Second, Paul says all things come “through him.” All things exist in and by God. He gives them agency and reality. All things have their cause in God. Nothing exists without His say so. If you are drawing it, you draw an arrow through God. All things are through Him.

And, third, Paul says all things are “for him.” All things exist, ultimately, for God. He is their purpose and goal. All things are moving toward him. All things have their reason in God. If you are drawing it, you draw an arrow toward God. All things are for Him.

Everything is dependent for its existence on God--at its beginning and all the way along and at the end. All things are “from him and through him” means that there is no explanation for what *is* or what *happens* that is deeper or more decisive than God. All things are “for him” means there is no greater purpose in the world than the purposes of God. This is what we mean when we say that God is absolutely sovereign. This is what we mean when we say we live and move and have our being in Him. (Acts 17:28)

The end result of all this, then, is that God alone is the worthy recipient of glory and praise. “To Him be the glory forever!” He does not share his glory with other gods, there are none! He does not share His glory with angels or saints, they find their glory in Him! And He does not share His glory with us! He did not design salvation so that we could boast in our wisdom or understanding, our good works or merit. He designed salvation so that all the glory, both now and forever, would be directed to the magnificence of His Son!

So let me ask you:

* Do you love the thought that you exist to make God look glorious?
* Do you love the thought that all creation exists to display the glory of God?
* Do you love the truth that all of history is designed by God to one day be a completed canvas that displays in the best way possible the greatness and beauty of God?
* Do you love the fact that Jesus Christ came into the world to vindicate the righteousness of God and repair the injury that we had done to the reputation of the glory of God?
* Do you love the truth you personally exist to make God look like what he really is — glorious?
* I ask again: Do you love the fact that your salvation is meant to put the glory of God’s grace on display? Do you love seeing and showing the glory of God?

Paul could not help himself. The deeper he dove into the riches of God’s plan for salvation, the more his heart was overtaken by praise. He stopped and he exclaimed:

36For from him and through him and for him are all things.
    To him be the glory forever! Amen.

What about you? Is your heart overwhelmed by the glory of God?

This is the beauty and the point of the doctrines of grace: Sola Deo Gloria.

To God alone be the glory.

Forever and ever.

Amen.