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ON DESERTS AND DUCKS

Romans 11:33-36

I read an article this week written by a man who had retired while he was in his 50’s. He found that retirement actually was a very unpleasant experience for him. He wrote the article because he had learned a way to make it far more enjoyable. He said there is one thing everyone needs in order to enjoy retirement, it was the thing he had found that fixed his problem. He said what he needed, what we all need, is to find a purpose. Purpose is key to a full life no matter what age you are.

The fact is we don’t do anything without purpose. Laurie and I have been frustrated by the fact that on our most recent attempts to play tennis while we were on vacation we were blocked by foot injuries. But I was thinking about the fact when we play tennis it would seem there’s no much point in it. We go out and hit tennis balls, we might even play a set against each other, but we don’t really compete. We’re not trying to beat each other, we’re not trying to improve our tennis skills, we’re not trying to prepare for matches in some competitive setting. It seems pointless. But it’s not. There is a point to it. We just want to go out and enjoy hitting the ball and being together. We just do it to have fun. That’s the purpose. There is always a purpose to what we do, or we won’t do it.

But what purpose we can serve that will be energizing, controlling, and fulfilling our entire lives matter what our circumstances may be? This is what we need for life to be the best it can be, but is there such a thing? In an article in *The New Yorker* Jean Lepore wrote about how the classic board game *The Game Of Life* has changed. One of the changes is there is no longer a set path to follow. Lepore wrote, “This is actually the game’s selling point; it has no goal. Life is aimless.” That is where our culture lands. There is no real point to life, so all we can do is have some pretend, articial purpose we make up that can distract us from the absurdity and emptiness of our existence. We can save the planet! Why? Who cares?

We won’t do anything without a purpose. If life has no purpose, we won’t live. But a true fulfilling purpose has to be real, compelling, larger than ourselves and our lives, and it needs to be something truly lasting. There really is only one such purpose that can fill our lives with true, lasting passion and fulfillment. We will see it in Romans 11:33-36

GOD’S WISDOM IS BEYOND US

Paul has now revealed in detail God’s astounding plan to rescue the human race by his grace through his Son, Jesus Christ. He has shown how this new system actually does not contradict and throw out the covenant God made with Israel, it fulfills and completes it. He has shown that God is sovereign, but that humans still have the ability to make choices of their own free will.

In chapter 12 Paul will begin discussing what practical implications this new covenant of grace has for how we are to live in the real world. Before he does that, he brings his thoughts on the theology of the gospel to a close with a great summary in these verses. He marvels at how deep, how profound, how mysterious God’s plan and working is, and he tells us about the astounding character of God.

Paul tells us that God is rich in wisdom and knowledge beyond our ability to comprehend. He says that God’s judgments, his decisions, and his ways of doing things are beyond our ability to understand. We can’t fathom what he does. Who knows what is in God’s mind? The implied answer is, “No human being. Not one.” Who of us can be the counselor of God, advising him on what needs to be done and how he ought to do things? Well, I try, quite a bit, but I’ve noticed he often doesn’t take my advice. I’ve also noticed often that later I was glad he didn’t.

Paul wrote these things because he was astounded at what God had done. Earlier in life he had thought he had God mostly figured out, and then God showed up and blew up Paul’s entire theological structure. His point was that he himself would never have even considered what God had done to be within the realm of possibility. Yet God had done the unimaginable and left Paul admitting that the whole thing was brilliant.

Our view of life, our understanding, is bounded by exceedingly small limits in comparison to the immensity of what God has created. Consider for a moment at our solar system. The outer edge of our little neighborhood in the universe is about 9 billion miles away from us. Escape velocity, the speed a craft has to reach to break free from the gravitational pull of the earth, is about 25,000 miles per hour. If we had a spacecraft that could travel at that speed to the edge of our solar system, how long would it take to get there. A year, 2 years, 5 years? No, it would take 41 years for us to exit our solar system. Sure hope you’re not taking kids with you on that trip. Can you imagine hearing, “Are we there yet?” for 41 years?

That’s just to get to the end of our little system, which is about like a teaspoon of water compared to the entire Pacific Ocean in relation to the rest of the universe. After we leave, where are we going? We should probably start by visiting the next neighborhood. The next star system is Alpha Centauri. That is actually a system of 3 stars. The one of the three that is closest to us is Proxima Centauri. It is 4.24 light years away. A light year is the distance light would travel in a year at a rate of 186,000 miles per second. At that rate light could travel more than 7 times around the earth in a second. How far would it go in an entire year? That is an absurdly great distance. It works out to about 6 trillion miles. That’s a 6 followed by 12 zeroes. So at 4.24 light years from us Proxima Centauri is more than 25 trillion miles away. That’s a number so big it loses meaning for us. Here’s an idea of what that means. Suppose we have a spacecraft with an ion propulsion system that can travel at 35,000 miles per hour. If we could take an ion propulsion craft to Proxima Centauri at that speed and we left today at noon, we would arrive sometime around noon 81,000 years from today. Given that 81,000 years is 76,000 years longer than the entire recorded history of the human race, I suspect I wouldn’t be alive when we get there. That’s just to the nearest star!

The universe is so immense our minds hit a wall in trying to grasp it. In comparison to the vastness of what God has created we are infinitesimally tiny. We are these microscopic beings trying to understand and sometimes challenge the unlimited, infinite creator of all that exists. The point here is that God has created something so enormous that it is beyond the capacity of our brains to wrap around it. That means that God himself is infinitely beyond our capacity to wrap our heads around because he conceived of all of it and then had the power and ability to bring it into being.

There are even great mysteries here on earth that we don’t understand. Humans have made incredible advances in our knowledge and our understanding of our world and of life. What has changed just in my lifetime makes my head spin. The problem is what we don’t understand is still massive. For instance, we much about gravity. Our lives depend upon it. In fact, it is crucial to the existence of the universe. We have math that can measure it and predict it. But here’s the problem. We don’t know what it is. We don’t even know why it exists.

Loggerhead turtles migrate around the Atlantic some 7,000 miles. How do they navigate those vast distances? Researchers have learned that different places in the world have slightly varying magnetic fields. These turtles are born with the innate ability to detect changes in magnetic fields and on the basis of those changes figure out their latitude and longitude and the direction they need to swim. How in the world did that come about? We have no clue. God does though.

Here’s a weird one. One night in 2017 dozens of octopi came out of the ocean on the coast of a town in Wales. Then they crawled along the coast for some distance before going back into the ocean. They did this every night for several nights in a row. Every night there was this strange octopus parade, and then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped. It hasn’t happened since. What was that about? No one knows. The thing is a bizarre mystery. I think it sounds like a horror movie. It’s a story about how swarms of these creepy sea creatures come up out of the ocean and terrorize the local inhabitants. The invasion of octopi. Or maybe you could call it Night Of The Octopus. Hey, it could be a thing. The octopi squirt ink at their victims to blind them, then they wrap them up with their 8 arms. Did you know that an octopus is venomous? It bites its victim and the venom paralyzes them, then they use their many suckers to suck the life out of them. Yeah, that’s right. This is one scary scenario. Kidding aside, that weird event was just one more little mystery of God’s creation that we can’t understand.

We should also remember the mystery of God’s working in this world. God’s prophets told of the coming of a Messiah many hundreds of years before he actually arrived. Think of the amazing fact that in Micah 5:2, 800 years before Christ came, the prophet said he would be born in the town called Bethlehem. Problem. Luke 2:1-4 tells us that Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. However, Caesar Augustus decreed that a census should be taken. This meant Joseph and Mary would have to go to Joseph’s family’s home town of Bethlehem to register for the census. While there Mary gave birth to her son. In Bethlehem. Do you see the amazing working of God in that? He used the Roman Caesar to order something for the entire empire to get Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem in order to fulfill a prophecy given hundreds of years earlier. That is an example of how God can work in ways that we could never imagine.

We have this weird tendency to think we should be able to understand and even question God’s judgments, ways and decisions. We do that all the time. But Paul says those judgments and ways are infinitely beyond our ability to understand. A while back Laurie and I needed a break. Life has been pretty hectic for us. We had the chance to spend most of a week out in Palm Desert relaxing. On our way out of town we dropped by some things at Michael and Carissa’s house. Wesley didn’t want us to leave. He told us we should take our shoes off and stay. We explained to him that we were going to the desert, but we would be back in a few days. Our explanation suffered from one glaring weakness. Wesley doesn’t know what a desert is. The word “desert” has no meaning for him. We didn’t think anything about it. What is funny is what Wesley did with that. Not knowing what a desert is, he apparently substituted something that made sense to him. He came up with ducks. He decided that we were going somewhere to see ducks. Carissa told us this and suggested that if we saw any ducks we could send him pictures of them. So every day in the desert we took pictures of ducks and sent them to him. One day we were sitting by the pool at our hotel and two ducks landed on the deck right in front of us, then walked into the pool and started paddling around. We got video of all of it.

The problem was that Wesley is not able at this point to understand what a desert is and why we would want to go there. So he defaulted to the closest thing he could come up with, and it was completely wrong. Wesley is infinitely closer to being able to understand us than we are to being able to understand God and his ways. When we don’t understand God we have a tendency to come up with something that is as close to the reality about him as seeing ducks is to going to the desert.

Thomas Aquinas was one of Christianity’s greatest scholars. He tried to create a compendium of knowledge that would encompass all of life. His masterpiece is called *Summa Theologica*. It is a massive work that deals with anthropology, science, ethics, psychology, political theory and theology. It is a profound and impressive work. But it is not complete. Aquinas abruptly stopped writing on December 6, 1273. He said that while worshiping he got a glimpse of the eternal. As a result of that experience he felt his efforts to describe God and his works fell so far short of the reality that he never wanted to work on it again. His secretary, Reginald, tried to get him to keep writing, but he said, “Reginald, I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems as so much straw.”

I can relate in a small way to Aquinas. Part of my role as a pastor is to try to represent God to people. But the longer I live the more acutely aware I become that I know so very little of what I’m talking about. Whatever I say about God falls pitifully and laughably short of his greatness and his majesty. What we know about God ultimately is what he has told us in his revelation of himself. It is the only way we know it. From just looking at the world we cannot know that God is just, full of grace, good, loving, kind and wise. We know these things because has told us.

When we start chafing because we do not understand how God could be sovereign, how he could rule all things and all events, yet we have real and meaningful choices, how God could be three persons, yet one being, how prayer works, how God could allow some tragedies and disappointments in our lives if he loves us, and all the other mysteries of life and theology, we need to remember that God’s ways are beyond our ability to search out, track or understand. Much of the time he's talking about deserts and we’re thinking ducks.

GOD DOES NOT OWE US ANYTHING

Verse 35 says, “Who has given to God that God should repay them?” God is the owner of everything. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” Everything in the world belongs to God. Psalm 50 says God owns every animal in the forest and the cattle on a thousand hills, he knows all of them even down to insects. Then in verse 12 he says, “The world is mine, and all that is in it.” This begs the question, what do we have that is not in the world? Obviously, the answer is nothing. Everything we have is in this world. I guess there might be someone out there somewhere that is trying to sell real estate on Mars, so maybe if you’re dumb enough you could buy a plot of land there and claim it’s not in this world. But that wouldn’t really work, because the “world” as used in Psalm 24:1 really means creation, which includes Mars. The point is, everything you and I think we own actually belongs to God.

We can’t give anything to God that doesn’t already belong to him. I think of it kind of like when our kids were little and it was my birthday. Laurie would give them some money so they could buy a little present for me. They were giving me a present that my money bought. So they were in effect giving me something that already belonged to me. That’s how it is with God.

You might say, “What about our time, our obedience? Isn’t that something we can give to God that doesn’t belong to him?” But notice the last part of Psalm 24:1. It says all who live in the world belong to God. So if you give yourself to God, you are only giving something to him that already belongs to him.

Our human nature objects to the idea that we don’t belong to ourselves, that we actually belong to God. I haven’t actually created many things. As I have mentioned recently, when I was in junior high I had to take a semester of metal shop and a semester of wood shop. I can only remember 3 things I made in those shop classes. In metal shop I made a cookie cutter and in wood shop I made a cutting board and a sanding block. There must have been something else, but I don’t recall what. The cutting board and sanding block are long gone, but we still have that cookie cutter. I made those things. They belong to me. I had the right to do with them whatever I wanted.

Yes, but those are things, not people. That’s true. However, notice what David wrote in Psalm 139:13-14. He said to God, “You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” God created our inmost being. He is the one who knit us together in our mother’s wombs. He made us. He sustains our lives. Were he to decide we should no longer exist, we would be gone in an instant. We belong to him.

When Paul wrote in verse 35 that no one has given to God that God should repay them, he meant that no one has God in his debt. God does not owe us anything. Not a single thing. It is common for us to think that God sort of owes us something. We ought to have a certain standard of life and to live a long time with a kind of life we think we want. When we don’t get life the way we want we sometimes feel like God has been unfair to us. What if our lives are cut much shorter than we would like? God has given us a raw deal, we think. But the truth is that God does not owe us anything. Every good thing we get is a gift from him. It is all a result of his kindness and grace. So we should be thankful for every little thing we get, and we should accept whatever God chooses to give us.

EVERYTHING IS FOR GOD

This is implied in what we just saw. Everything that exists is from God. God is the author of all of it. This can cause me some heartburn theologically. Doesn’t this make God the creator of sharks? Doesn’t it make God the creator of mosquitoes? Is there any creature more annoying than a mosquito?

We were thrilled 43 years ago when some friends as a wedding present gave us a week in their condo right on a beach on Kauai for our honeymoon. We were overwhelmed by Hawaii. We fell in love with it and have never really gotten over it. This condo was nice but it wasn’t air conditioned. They set some records for heat the last couple of days we were there. It was hot, but we loved it. However, to keep the condo cool we had it open much of the time. Our last night there a mosquito had made its way into the condo. When we went to bed the little beast tried to join us. We’d be just falling asleep then we heard the little whine of that mosquito flying in for the attack. We’d try to kill the thing, but he’d always escape. This went on for some time until we’d had enough. We developed a plan. It was a one bedroom condo that had a sleeper sofa in the living room. We waited until that little bug made his presence known, then we jumped out of bed, dashed out of the room and closed the door. We successfully outwitted him. We trapped him in the bedroom, and we slept out in the living room. We congratulated ourselves that we were smarter than a mosquito.

But why would God make such things? I know it plays some role in the ecosystem, but it feels like its role is to be an irritant and a disease spreader. Why did God make them? If God created everything, doesn’t that mean he is the creator of the corona virus that has caused so much misery the last 2 years? No that was actually created by people in a lab in Wuhan, China. Just kidding. I don’t know how that nasty bug came about. This is where we run into the truth that God’s judgments are unsearchable. God is much greater, much wiser than I will ever be, and it is not my place to question what he has done.

The salient point here is that whatever it is, if it were not for God, it would not exist. John 1:3 says, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” That includes us. If God had not made us, we would not exist. Why did God make us? He also has a purpose in all he does. That’s where we must pay attention to the last part of that first sentence of verse 36. “For him are all things.” God has made us for himself. This is a radical truth. We think we exist for ourselves. I’m alive to do whatever I want to do and to seek my own good. Pursuing what I deem to be my own good is the driving force behind everything I think and do. And that idea has a head on collision with what verse 36 says. I don’t exist for myself. I exist for God. I am alive to fulfill a purpose he has for me. I am alive to do whatever he wants me to do. That is the reason for my existence.

The usual human way of thinking is that the ultimate question in the choices I make, the values I have, the goals I live for, is “What do I want to do?” This verse says something radically different. It says the ultimate question in our choices, values, behavior, pursuits and goals should be, “What does God want me to do?” I don’t live for myself, I live for him. I exist to do his bidding, and for no other reason.

Wow, that is a very different way of thinking and living. It is so different that we have trouble doing it even for a few minutes, much less all day, all the time. My human nature does not like that idea. I exist for someone else’s purposes? That means I’m just a cog in his plan, that I only matter as something useful for him. I’m just here to be used. That doesn’t feel good to me. It makes God sound like a puppeteer and I’m the puppet. That might be true if it weren’t for the inscrutable, magnificent character of God. Remember what is at the core of God’s being. 1 John 4:8 says God is love. His essence is love. Read Psalm 136 some time. It is 26 verses long. Every other line in the Psalm is “His love endures forever.” That means that God does not think of us nor treat us as mere cogs in his machine, tools to be used. He loves us, which means he is always seeking our good. In his unsearchable wisdom God has a divine way of having us exist for his purposes, but that turns out to be for our good. It turns out to be a loving thing to do for us.

We don’t understand that as humans because when think people exist for our purposes, we use them. It becomes selfish. But God is the opposite of that. We exist for his purposes, but his purpose gives us good. Maybe the closest we can come to it is remembering that God relates to us as a heavenly Father. The parent child relationship has some similarity to how God works. Michael and Carissa have attempted to have swimming lessons for Wesley. He’s 2 years old, so they have limited expectations. They don’t anticipate that he will actually be able to swim when he’s done. They hope to get him used to being in a pool and possibly get him to the place where if he fell into a pool he would be able to survive by grabbing onto the edge. They have a purpose for him. I was surprised at how well his first lesson went. I was expecting big resistance and a meltdown, but none of that happened. At least at the first lesson. It is exactly what happened at the second lesson. Wesley wanted no part of it. He couldn’t understand why his parents were being so mean to him. But the whole time they were seeking his good. This is how it goes with us. God uses us for his purposes, but his purposes are always for our good. He is awesome in his ability to use us for his purposes while always loving us and seeking our best.

In Romans 1:1 Paul introduced himself as “a servant of Christ Jesus.” However, the Greek word he used literally meant a slave. Paul understood that he existed for God, so he saw himself as a slave of God. This was a big deal in his culture, a culture that has something very much in common with ours. *The Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament* says, “The distinctive feature of the self-awareness of the Greek is the thought of freedom. The Greek finds his personal dignity in the fact that he is free. Thus his self-awareness stands out sharply from anything which stands under the concept of (being a slave). For where there is slavery human autonomy is set aside and an alien will takes precedence of one’s own.” Our culture is much the same. We find the idea of setting aside our human autonomy and having the will of another, the will of God take precedence in our lives. Yet that is exactly what this verse calls us to.

When Paul called himself a slave of God, that was what he understood it to mean. His life was not about whatever he might think, feel or want, it was only about whatever the Master wants, what God wants. For us to live in the reality of the fact that we are created for God, that is what this will mean. This is a radical way to live, one that is so foreign to us that it is almost inconceivable.

This seems hard, even unpleasant to us. Something in us wants no part of living like this. We must remember that because he loves us, he only seeks our good. That means that we will never find our ultimate good, we will never experience true fullness of life, until we live as God desires us. He created us. He knows what is best for us, what produces the fullest possible life in us. If you want to find life, real life, the life you’ve always sought, lose your life in serving God. That is the only way to gain it.

APPLICATION

The final sentence of these verses sums up how we should apply it. “To him be the glory forever! Amen.” We, along with everything else, exist for God. We are all here to do what Psalm 19 says the heavens do, declare the glory of God.

Remember as I said in my introduction that we must have a purpose for what we do, but that apart from God life is aimless. That’s a problem. Except it’s not true. Life has a point. Our point is to live for the glory of God. What will that mean? Paul is going to tell us in the rest of Romans. But even in what we’ve seen today we get a breath taking glimpse of how we should live.

It will mean trusting his judgments and wisdom even when we don’t understand them. There are going to be things that happen to us that are impossible to understand. Why would God let this happen? That’s where we have to admit our limitations and trust in the ineffable wisdom of God.

This is crucial for us because life is going to hand us all some unpleasantness as we get older. In his book, *What God Has To Say About Our Bodies*, Sam Allberry discusses the fact that after the age of 40 things start changing. He noticed 2 particular things. First, you get excited about going to bed. Kids never want to go to bed. The little ones use every trick in the book to delay it. College kids love staying up in the wee hours of the morning. I can’t wait to hit the hay.

The other thing he identifies is that you still get hurt, but you don’t have a good story behind it. I have stories of breaking a rib playing rugby or of tearing a finger nail out and breaking a finger playing baseball when I was young. But he’s right, now I get hurt without anything remotely cool happening. Allberry tells the story of a time when he stayed in a new hotel and woke up in the morning after his first night with a hot, searing pain in his shoulder. He said, “It felt like I’d been morally stabbed by a Ringwraith from *Lord Of The Rings*.” It was agony. He called the front desk and they sent the hotel doctor. He said the doctor injected him with a painkiller using “the largest needle I had ever seen not being used on an elephant.” He asked the doctor what caused this, and the doctor said sleeping on his shoulder the wrong way. He wrote, “One of the most painful things I’d ever done to myself, and the cause was lying in bed sleeping.” Yeah, it’s depressing to get injured doing nothing, but that is where life is taking us all.

How will we deal with the difficulties life will hand us? We give glory to God by trusting him with all of it, whatever happens.

When we face opposition, difficulty, loss, pain, our goal should be to bring glory to God in it. That does not mean denying the hardship, pretending everything is fine. It means standing firm in our faith, believing God is good, thanking him, wanting to display grace, love, patience and kindness through it.

Earlier this year in a playoff game, I saw Patrick Mahomes, the quarterback of the Kansas City Chiefs, face a seemingly impossible situation. In the closing moments he had driven his team to a go ahead touchdown with less than 2 minutes remaining only to see the Buffalo Bills take the ball down the field and score a touchdown and 2 point conversion to take a 3 point lead. The Chiefs got the ball back with only 13 seconds left on their own 25 yard line. It was a lost cause. But in that moment he brought his team back to win an absurdly unlikely victory. In doing the seemingly impossible he cemented his reputation as a true star. Those hard times we face are the crucial times, the times of glory, the times we can truly honor God.

We give glory to God by living for him, not for ourselves. That choice brings great glory and honor to him. It also happens to produce true life for us, but that is almost a by product, a positive side effect of the treatment. Laurie and I were talking about where life is going to take us in the coming years. We don’t know. We can see looking back that we have never really known. No one does. That’s certainly one thing the pandemic should have taught us all, but that is more apparent to us now than ever. All we know is that at some point change is coming. We talk now about having a 5 day plan. We have an idea what we should do for the next 5 days, so we focus on doing that. I wish we had a 20 year plan, but we don’t. But one thing we can do is decide whatever comes in our future, our purpose is not to be comfortable, or to promote ourselves, or to protect ourselves, but it is to live for God’s glory in everything we are and do. Laurie has always joked that her goal is to look cute and have fun. She mostly succeeds at that, but that really isn’t what her life is about. She really lives to bring glory to God.

Finally, when Paul says, “to him be the glory forever” that includes us giving him glory. We should be honoring God with our words, both to him in prayer, and about him with others. Every time we sing praise to God, every time we tell someone else about who he is, what he has done, we are giving him glory. And we are fulfilling the very purpose of our existence.