

RESPONDING TO RICHES

by Steve Zeisler

I was listening to one of the fire officials in southern California being interviewed on the radio this week. The reporter asked him, "If the rainy season began, would that help with the fire problem?" His answer was essentially, "If it was a light rain it would be very helpful, but if it starts raining hard, then we face the danger of mud slides." He went on to say that some people complain that southern California really has no seasons. But he answered, "In southern California we have four seasons like in other parts of the country. But our seasons are fire, flood, earthquake, and drought!"

When you think about fire and other extreme hardships in which all that is familiar is destroyed, perhaps you ask yourself what you would grab from your home if you could take only what you could carry in your hands. Or if you had a chance to talk to only a few people under emergency circumstances, who would you want to talk to or be with? Desperate times have a way of focusing our values. We realize what is important to us and what isn't. We discover truths about ourselves that are helpful to know, although we would rather find them out without having to undergo such extremes. A deep encounter with God in worship is even more revealing of who we are than the most extreme conditions of fire or flood or earthquake. To apprehend God truly makes all other demands on us seem trivial by comparison.

We have come to the third major section of the book of Romans. (If you were to outline it, the first eight chapters are a logical unit, as are chapters 9-11, which we have almost finished considering. And the final chapters, 12-16, also fit together with a common theme.) This final section has to do with practical Christian living. How shall we live our lives as a response to the actions and revelation of God?

Learning Worship

Let's begin by reading verse 33 of chapter 11, and we'll ignore the chapter division, which is misleading where it is, and continue with chapter 12, verses 1-2:

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

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?"

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

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God---this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is---his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The heart of what it means to worship is to respond to God. He is first, he speaks first, he acts first; and our worship is responding to his initiative toward us in our thinking, our obedience, and our praise and glorification of him. He is glorious before it occurs to us to glorify him.

There are some common misconceptions of worship in the world we live in that may at times be true of us. Let me mention three. One is that worship happens as a routine. You may be the sort of person who has learned to do things in an orderly manner. Every three thousand miles you change the oil in your car. Once a week you go to visit your aunt in the nursing home. And you have various other routines that you have adopted because they are useful and helpful. Going to church on a regular basis fits your routine. It gives life a healthy balance. So worship is conceived of as one part of the routine of assignments that you have in life. But that is not Christian worship. Acting on a routine basis is not apprehending the greatness of God and responding to it.

The second misconception is that worship is a kind of spiritual aerobics in which you decide to improve the muscle tone of the soul. You say to yourself, "I'm going to go back to church and reform myself. I'm going to think God's thoughts and become spiritually more alert." You might make the same sort of decision if your financial affairs were in a mess. So you decide to become spiritually fit and begin some exercise of the inner person. But that isn't worship either. That doesn't begin with God's eliciting a response from you. It begins with some change you want to make in yourself.

The third misconception that is inadequate to describe what Paul is saying here about worship is to think of the spiritual world as something available for you to tap into. Because you have needs and want to become whole and strong, you go attempt to draw upon some impersonal power that resides deep within. In the ancient world when they believed in a pantheon of capricious and whimsical gods, the ancients would at times build idols, perform dervish dances, cut themselves, act with sexual promiscuity, and do all sorts of other things to awaken the attention of the gods toward them, because they needed crops to grow or animals to bear young. And we sometimes think of worship that way too---we seek God by ritual to get him to pay attention to us and give us what we need. But again, that is exactly the wrong way around. He is already interested in us and has already made himself known. We must respond to his initiative. We must come in gratitude, wonder, love, and praise.

Overwhelmed By The Mind of God

At the end of the first section of Romans in chapter 8 is a marvelous cry of praise regarding God's love, "Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ!" At the end of the second section in chapter 11 it is the mind of God, his thinking and judgments and sovereign choosing, that has captivated Paul. God's love is marvelous, but God's mind is also staggering to contemplate. Romans 11:25, "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery..." He has spoken of the workings of God in history, rooted in Abraham, looking forward to the day of Israel's glory, grafting in the Gentiles, choosing both Jew and Gentile, teaching each of them of their desperation, and binding all of them over to disobedience that all might be shown mercy. Paul loses his breath trying to think clearly about the brilliance of the mind of God in his ways, his dealings, and his choices.

In 11:33 we read Paul's expression of worship before his instruction of others. The apostle most often dictated his letters to a secretary rather than hand-writing them. I have often pictured him pacing back and forth dictating this letter. And here he has arrived at the realization that he is declaring truths he's not completely appreciated before and seeing intricacies that have never before penetrated his mind. He declares, "Oh my Lord! What have I just said? What have I just thought? A God who thinks like this, a God whose greatness is this!" And he cries out worshiping (not teaching others):

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

'Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?'
'Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?'
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen."

There is a spontaneity about this that we can learn from. If worship becomes too predictable, if it something that is completely planned, if we know how we will feel and what we will think at various points in a worship service or any kind of gathering in which we turn our attention to God, then we have lost something. When God displays himself, our spontaneous response ought to be more than we would have expected or different than we would have predicted.

I am not just speaking of emotions here. Some people complain that this church or other churches are insufficiently emotional in worship. Emotions are an important part of it, and we can at times find tears flowing down our cheeks because of something we have heard, seen, thought, or experienced. But it is not just that. It is being overtaken or overwhelmed with the reality that we see more clearly than we have before and that penetrates us more deeply than it has before. That is exactly what Paul is experiencing here.

We need to get to the point at which there is no part of us observing ourselves. If you have ever really fallen head-over-heels in love with someone, you stop measuring, manipulating, or trying to control what is happening to you. You find yourself so swept away with your beloved that you're not paying attention to yourself anymore; there is no observer status left. You are entirely involved with the one who has taken your heart. And if that can be true in relationships with human beings, how much more it ought to be true when we see God for who he really is!

No Longer Observers

Worship can be stunted; we can be too controlling and fearful of what might happen, so we put clamps on our response to God. Paul was genuinely overtaken by something that he had seen in writing of the mind of God. The call of his heart here says that he had been grabbed by God in a way that we must allow for if real worship is to take place.

I was at a wedding here yesterday, and there was a very professional wedding photographer and his assistant taking pictures. They were efficient, good at what they did. I'm sure the pictures will be outstanding. But as far as I could tell from observing their behavior, they were not interested at all in the marriage itself. They weren't dwelling on the beauty of two lives being given to one another the struggle and joy that was going to take place in the marriage. They were just interested in getting good pictures. And so they missed the greater thing.

At an open-casket funeral a couple of weeks ago I was moved by seeing what remained of someone with whom I had spoken and worshipped. The family, of course, were stirred deeply during the service. But the funeral director was a completely professional man---very competent, soft-spoken, and ordered. Everything happened right on schedule. This was just one of scores per year of bodies that he works on, puts in caskets, and manages funerals for. He was not personally effected by this loss of life.

Some friends of ours are going to have a baby soon. They were discussing birth preparation classes. Their professional LaMaze teacher is going to teach them how to breathe to get through the labor, but pregnancies and expectant parents all look alike to her. Maybe the obstetrician who delivers the baby, a very professional person, has delivered hundreds of babies. But neither of these people needs to care very much about the marvelous thing---a child!---that is coming into the lives of this couple.

We may or may not see and be captivated by a birth, death or marriage. But when we worship God, there ought to be something deeply, spontaneously, unexpectedly, and powerfully overtaking us. That was Paul's experience, and it should be ours as well.

Thoughtful Worship

Something else we can see in the verses that end Romans 11 is that it was humbling to Paul to think the things that he had thought and to have God reveal himself as he had, but he was not rolling on the ground or speaking mysterious, ecstatic phrases. He understood what he had seen and he could articulate truth about this God who had made himself known. He speaks of the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. To me

those are very striking terms. Have you ever seen something that was much deeper than you had experienced before?

Suppose you were a pretty good sculptor, and you had finished a project that you were quite impressed with. What if you then were driven to the Grand Canyon, and as you held your sculpture...you looked over the rim of the Grand Canyon. The work of the heavenly sculptor dwarfs our efforts.

Or perhaps you work for a little company that goes public, and you make some money, so you buy a new car. You are impressed with the riches that are newly assigned to you in life. But all of a sudden you are introduced to somebody who is so staggeringly wealthy that he could buy and sell you, your company, your whole family, and everybody else you know a hundred times over. You begin to think that what looked like riches at one point is paltry by comparison.

That kind of contrast is what Paul is speaking of here. He really sees the enormous depth of the heart and mind of God. He is really impressed with the awesome riches of the sovereignty of God. He really begins to imagine what it must be like to be able to think with judgments that are unsearchable, to act in ways that could never be followed. He looks clearly at the wisdom and knowledge of God. And then he asks almost sarcastic questions: Who is the one God called up and asked advice of? Or who could ever have God in their debt, giving him something that he doesn't already have. What silliness! There is a deep humility that has taken place here. And the apostle is thoughtful; he understands why he is humbled.

Paul is just like Isaiah, who, when he saw the Lord on his throne in Isaiah 6:1-8, fell to the ground and said, "I am undone! It's all over! I give up, I have nothing left to contribute. What use is there in me?" So on the one hand, without being able to control it or expecting it to happen, Paul spontaneously finds himself captured by what he sees when God displays himself. Then on the other hand, in verse 1 of chapter 12 he becomes a teacher and speaks of a further step in learning to worship: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God---this is your spiritual act of worship."

The Test of Real Worship

The spontaneous appreciation of God offered by our spirits, grows into a life of practical obedience. Our actions and resources are God's to command. Indeed, we can measure the depth of our inner response by the changes we see in the way we live.

"...Offer your bodies as living sacrifices...." Paul says. He is thinking of the ancient sacrifices of Israel in which people would execute animals on an altar as a way of indicating that they were offering God all that was theirs. We offer God our own, living bodies. Worship is going to result in obedience, and it is going to make us different in very practical terms. How do we act, how do we treat people, how do we treat things? Are we honest, are we lazy, are we superficial? It is a spiritual act of worship to offer our bodies. Another helpful translation of the word spiritual is logical (*logikos* in Greek) or rational. Worship displays who we are in our hearts, and it displays who we are in our actions. We are a whole; not different on the inside from who we are on the outside.

The word mercy in verse 1 is an important one to examine as well. It is by God's mercy that we may offer him our bodies as a living sacrifice. When you hear the word sacrifice, do you think of something that is difficult and requires heroic effort to accomplish? We think we ought to get some credit for being sacrificial. But that is exactly the opposite of what Paul is suggesting here. It is by God's mercy that we may offer him our bodies as a living sacrifice.

Merciful Acceptance

In Deuteronomy 15:19, one of the passages that teach about the offering of animals to God in Israel's ancient worship, they were told to consecrate the first of the herd in the flock. The whole family was to join together once a year in a designated place and offer an animal---the very first, the beginning, the high point, so that all that followed would be symbolically included. But---and this is a major exclusion---if the animal had any

defect in it, they were not to sacrifice it. Later the prophets would condemn the Israelites for bringing blind, lame, and useless animals that weren't any good to them anymore. They would take these to the temple and keep the better animals for themselves.

What Paul is saying here is that it is a mercy that God will receive us---we are the ones who ought to have been excluded. If defective sacrifices are set aside, we would never be allowed to serve him. But we are permitted to offer our bodies and our lives as a sacrifice to him, not in great heroism of our own but as his gift to us.

Transformed From Within

Finally, verse 2 speaks of the process of entering into a life that is given over to serving the Lord: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Most of us live in conformity to the standards around us. If we are in a community of people who are very aggressive, competitive, and devious---every man for himself, tooth and claw---then we tend to enter into that mindset ourselves. We are taught how to live by the media, by our families---perhaps dysfunctional---by cultures and friends and schools. The problem is that when we become Christians or want to be different for the Lord's sake, what we tend to do is try to find a better group of people and conform to them. But that is not how to offer our bodies to God. That doesn't work, because the Christian group we join will still be filled with people who are inadequate to pattern our lives after. And trying to make the externals fit into the new group is not going to make a new person out of you or me.

The alternative to being conformed to the world we live in is to be transformed from the inside, to have renewed minds, to actually begin to think differently about ourselves and about why we are here and what we are good for; to focus on God's description of us and to receive a sense of well-being and purpose that comes from him.

This instruction on how to respond to the initiative of God has come full circle, hasn't it? Verse 33 of chapter 11 says the mind of God is too great to conceive of. His are judgments unsearchable, his ways untraceable, his wisdom so rich that it staggers the thinking of the one who is speaking of it. And at the end of verse 2 we see that the apostle can write of approving the thoughts of God, at least as they regard us. His will becomes something that we understand and agree with. We begin to have some sense of his intention for us, why we are here, where we are to go, and what we are to do.

I was here on Friday evening getting ready to rehearse a wedding that took place here on Saturday. I was actually going over this sermon, and I wanted to reread Isaiah 6. I had just turned to it in my study upstairs. Isaiah saw the Lord, and the cherubim were crying, "Holy, holy, holy...." Suddenly, one of the transformers in Palo Alto went dead, and the lights in this whole area went out. There is a window across the hall from my office, but it was very near dusk when this happened.

The room was plunged into an eerie half- or almost quarter-light. I was trying to imagine Isaiah in the temple with the smoke filling the room and the train of God filling the temple, and in a moment I was plunged into near darkness. I thought, "It's You, isn't it? You're telling me not to just study this just to preach it. You do invade lives, You do capture our attention, You do speak to us in ways that remind us that this isn't just a bunch of people talking about God, but there is a living God here. All the rest of Palo Alto has to be plunged into darkness just so I can have the experience of thinking about You in my study in an eerie half-light with the darkness and the quiet and awareness of Your presence."

Worship should be spontaneous and captivating, thoughtful and humbling. It should involve a response of obedience in us from the inside out because that is the only thing that really makes sense. Ultimately the battle is going to have to do with either conforming to this world, or being renewed from the inside. It is a marvelous calling!

We still have much to see in this book about spiritual gifts we have been given, how to love each other when it is difficult, how to get along with governments, and other practical ways that this response to God's disclosure issues itself in real life. But the beginning point is worship that is genuine, complete, and life-changing.

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