

The Miracle of the Method

Romans 11:33-36

Based on a series by Greg Fine

Introduction: One of the mysteries of Christmas that always fascinated me as a child was wondering how it was possible for Santa to deliver toys to every boy and girl in the world, and accomplish all that in just one night. It really is quite mind-boggling when you think about it! Maybe you have wondered that too.

Thanks to the Office of Science at the U.S. Department of Energy we have the answer to that little problem. According to the Population Reference Bureau, about 378 million people celebrate Christmas worldwide. With an average of 3.5 children per home, that's 91.8 million homes for Santa to visit. Thanks to the rotation of the earth, starting at the International Date Line, moving from east to west crossing different time zones, Santa has not just 10 hours of night to deliver his presents but actually 34 hours in all.

Scientists speculate that Santa accomplishes this task by flying his magic reindeer at close to the speed of light, which is 186,000 miles per second. If his sleigh travels at 99 percent of the speed of light Santa could cover the required 76 million miles in less than seven minutes, leaving him the rest of the 34 hours to polish off the cookies and milk the children have left him on their kitchen tables.

This also explains why Santa never seems to age. From year to year, he retains his cherub face and his round belly that jiggles like a bowlfull of jelly. The fact is that for objects traveling at close to the speed of light, time slows down. So, the more packages Santa delivers, the more he'll travel, and the more he'll remain the same, carrying on the Christmas tradition for generations of children to come.

I can tell from looking at your faces that you are not quite sure you believe this explanation. Maybe you think this method is completely ridiculous. Most of you are looking at me with that quizzical expression wondering what in the world this discussion has to do with the real Christmas story. Thank you for asking.

Part of the miracle of Christmas is the miracle of the method. God's methods are beyond our comprehension. Paul writes in Romans 11:33,

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

34 "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?"

35 "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?"

36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

Paul begins this doxology of praise to God focusing on the greatness of God and on how absolutely glorious He is. His riches, wisdom and knowledge are great beyond measure. God's methods are beyond our understanding. Honestly, when you think about God's methods throughout history and in particular in the Christmas story, it's as hard to understand as how Santa delivers all the toys in one night isn't it?

God's methods are not easy to get your mind around. Romans, chapters 9-11 are some of the most difficult chapters in the Bible to understand. The subject is God's

incredible plan to orchestrate a way to save both Jews and Gentiles through Jesus Christ. That part sounds simple enough, but Paul is wrestling with how the Jews could be God's chosen people and yet find themselves so out of favor due to unbelief. How could God reject His own special people and accept the heathen Gentiles? This troubles Paul's mind so much that he even says **"For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh,"** (Rom. 9:3).

Paul says that the Jews are the chosen instrument of God to bring salvation to the Gentiles and that God is so sovereign that he even uses the rejection of the Jews as a way to save the Gentiles. The Jews' rejection of Christ led to the opportunity for the Gentiles. While at the same time, God planned to use the acceptance of the Gentiles to arouse the jealousy of the Jews that they might also be saved.

The eternal destiny of all mankind, Jews and Gentiles, is at stake in this discussion. Paul quotes several difficult OT texts to underscore God's election and sovereignty. In these chapters he says things about God that we find hard to understand. In Romans 9:13 he says, **"Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."** And in 9:15, **"I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion."** About Pharaoh in 9:17, **"For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."** In 9:22,23 Paul talks about **"vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,"** and **"vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,"** (Rom. 9:22,23). Have I lost anybody yet? Hard to understand isn't it?

But Paul also says a lot of things we do understand. In Romans 10:9-10 Paul says, **"that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."** In 12 he says, **"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him,"** and in verse 13, **"For 'whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.'" So, we know that God does not save or condemn people arbitrarily. Our response matters; and no one is saved or lost simply because they are a Jew or a Gentile. Yet, the overwhelming emphasis of the text is that God is sovereign and He will continue to bring about His great plan of salvation precisely in His way, by His election, even when we might not understand what it is He is doing.**

I have studied these chapters in the past, and studied them again this week in preparing for this message. I have read the thoughts of great Bible scholars on these chapters. But in the end I was so overwhelmed by the incredible depth and complexity of all that God is accomplishing through His plan of salvation that I was just left awe struck. I could never have all the answers. I was simply left with in awe and wonder of the greatness of God.

As you can see, that was Paul's response also. Romans 11:33, **"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"**

So my first response to God's methods is:

1. **Wow!** (11:33). Paul says, **"Oh!"**

God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.

Paul seems to be struggling to find the right words to describe the depths of God's riches. The word "depth" describes an enormous distance below a surface. God is so deep that we can only go down a few feet and peer into eternity.

"Depth" probably goes with all three nouns. "Riches, wisdom, and knowledge." How deep is the ocean? Not deeper than God's riches. How vast is the Grand Canyon? Not vaster than the wisdom of God. How expansive is the Milky Way? Not as expansive as His knowledge.

Think about the method God used to save the world. I would have liked to have been a star listening in on that conversation as God announced His plan to the heavenly host. Think about the ways that God had already revealed Himself in history to people. He had revealed Himself through a burning bush, through a pillar of fire and a cloud. He revealed Himself through a variety of different means through His prophets as we discussed last week. In the Christmas story we have the grand finale. This is the greatest, grandest revelation of who God is and what He is like.

Can you hear the heavenly host discussing the options? I imagine them saying something like, *"God, you are going to visit earth? Great, we'll prepare your chariot of fire. We will gather all the angels to announce your arrival. When you visit the earth in all your splendor and glory no one will be able to deny that you alone are God, that you alone are worthy of worship. Every knee shall bow and tongue confess that you are Lord! It will be a day to remember! Let's pull out all the stops. No shortcuts here on this day. We will do a full-scale, grand revelation that will turn every head so that they will see you in your royal splendor and holiness."*

I can almost see the expressions on their faces when God interrupts their conversation to announce that His plan is different. He announces to the heavenly host that His method for saving the world is to visit the earth as a human. After a brief moment of stunned silence the heavenly host again break the silence as they erupt into conversation about preparing the most beautiful and wonderful palace for the king. They discuss the need to prepare the most powerful army for the king to rule. They begin discussing all the things they need to prepare on earth for the arrival of the King when God interrupts again to explain that His plan is not to come as a conquering king. He would come into the world as a helpless, defenseless, baby.

God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways are past finding out. God chose to be born to humble, poor parents. He wasn't born in a palace but in a stable. He was born to a young couple whose worldly influence was non-existent. Mary and Joseph were plain, ordinary people, living their lives in obscurity. There was nothing about them that would garner world-wide attention or fame. Yet they are the ones God chose to be the parents of Jesus. Through them, God's greatest, grandest revelation will come.

How absolutely crazy is that? The life of the king of the entire universe is going to be entrusted to a simple carpenter and his wife. As the songwriter says, *"This is such a strange way to save the world!"* We certainly can resonate with Romans 11:33, how impossible it is for us to understand God's decisions and methods! Isaiah 55:8-9 says, **"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your**

ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.'"

God's ways are not our ways. His methods are not our methods. That is the miracle of Christmas – it is the miracle of the method! God does what he does by His sovereign will. God chooses and acts and no one can change it or challenge it. God chose Abraham to leave his home and travel to the place of promise. God chose to love the deceitful younger son, Jacob, over his brother Esau. He chose Israel, the least significant nation to be His special people. He chose David, the shepherd boy over all his older brothers to become the king of Israel. He chose Bethlehem, a small, insignificant spot on the landscape of Israel, to be the birthplace for His Son. God chose to save Gentiles so that the Jews will come to believe. Over and over and over again, God chose plain, ordinary people through whom He could do His extraordinary work. How impossible it is for us to understand God's decisions and methods!

Luke records in his account of Christ's birth that Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem to register for the census. While there the time came for the baby to be born and Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. A manger is a feeding trough for animals. The king of the universe is born in a barn and sleeps in a feeding trough.

To celebrate the occasion the angels announce the news of Christ's birth but to whom do they go and herald this wondrous news? Not kings and queens, not military leaders, not the high priest, or even the local rabbi. God reveals it to—shepherds! God choose to make this grand announcement to some simple shepherds who are out at night fulfilling watching over their flocks. The more you think about it the more incredible the whole story becomes! It's almost, well, unbelievable. Part of the miracle of Christmas is the miracle of the method. How impossible it is for us to understand God's decisions and methods!

Paul comments on this miracle of the method – that God uses ordinary people to accomplish His extraordinary work when he writes in 1 Corinthians, **"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."** (1 Corinthians 1:26-29 NIV)

God's method hasn't changed. As unbelievable as it may sound, as incredible as it may seem, God still chooses to use ordinary people just like you and me to accomplish extraordinary things for His kingdom! Our aptitude is not as important as our attitude; our abilities are not as important as our availability. God has entrusted to us the Good News of salvation. The salvation of the world, including this community, now rests in our hands. Good for us that God can use even the simplest of vessels to accomplish great things.

But there is another aspect to this miracle of the method that we need to understand this morning. The next two verses (Romans 11:34-35) should cause wonder to rise up in us as we contemplate three questions.

2. Wonder! (11:34-35).

God uses unusual methods for our good and His glory.

Paul picks three questions from the Old Testament to prove his point. From Isaiah 40:13 he asks, **"For who has known the mind of the LORD?"** The obvious answer to this question is "no one." We can know only what He has chosen to reveal in His word. Deuteronomy 29:29 says that there are some things we will never know: **"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."** God shows to us part of His wondrous ways and we can be thankful to God for revealing Himself. But many times we can't understand. What we can do is bow before Him in wonder and awe. God is the transcendent one, He is beyond us.

Again from Isaiah 40 Paul asks, **"Or who has become His counselor?"** Again, the answer is "no one." Have you ever thought that if you were God you would do things differently? Do you wish that the Lord would consult with you? I like the way Peterson paraphrases this question: **"Is there anyone smart enough to tell him what to do?"** God is sufficient in Himself. He doesn't need advice from me on how to run the universe. Most of the time I can't even do a good job of running my own life or family—let alone trying to run the whole universe! It is laughable to think anyone would presume to be God's teacher. Is there anything God doesn't know?

Thirdly Paul takes a lesson from Job when he asks, **"Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?"** Answer: No one. Have you ever thought that God somehow owes you something? Elihu, one of Job's supposed friends, was wrong in his assessment of Job but right in his understanding of God in Job 41:11, which is where this quote in Romans comes from: **"Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine,"** (NASB). We can't give to God anything that is not already His. God doesn't owe us anything, we owe Him everything. We could summarize all of Romans 9-11 by saying this: God saves those He is under no obligation to save.

Part of the miracle of the method is that God is at work in our lives in ways that we do not and cannot fully comprehend and understand! In the same way that we would have written the script differently concerning the redemption of mankind, we would also write the script differently for our own redemption. We would write the script so that God would reward us for our goodness, repay us for our fidelity. But God does not do that. Instead, as verse 32 says, **"For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all."** God sent His Son to save us because we were disobedient sinners. God had mercy on us, not because we deserved it, but because it was His will that Christ should pay the price for it.

And even after we begin that spiritual journey through faith in Christ we would write the script so that we would love serve God continually. We would never have any problems. We would never sin again. Life would be heavenly bliss until the day we finally arrive at our eternal home. But the truth is, life on earth is anything but heavenly bliss. We experience problems, pains and pressures. We experience

struggles and sickness and sin. We experience temptations and failures. We take one step forward in our spiritual growth and follow it with three steps back. This is not the way we would write the script. And God speaks to us to remind us that His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts. How impossible it is for us to understand His methods!

Think about what it meant for Mary and Joseph to be the parents of God's Son. Luke 2:19 tells us after her child was born, the angels had appeared, and the shepherds had visited that, "... **Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.**" Mary wondered at it all. But Mary and Joseph could not have imagined all that they would have to go through. They had to endure shame, accusation, embarrassment and ridicule. They had to flee for their lives to a foreign country. Life for them was not easy. Eventually Mary would have to watch as her son was rejected by His people and crucified.

I can't answer all your questions as to why some things have happened in your life. I can't give you easy answers for complex questions that seem beyond logic. I don't have all the answers. I don't have God completely figured out and all wrapped up in a brightly colored box with a pretty bow on top. God is much bigger than my mind can comprehend.

The miracle of the method is that we are left to wonder at the fact that God works in ways that we do not understand. We are forced to trust that God is good. That is part of the mystery and miracle of Christmas.

Oh, what a wonderful God we have! How great are his riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his methods! (NLT) Continue to trust God, even though you don't completely understand how He is at work in your life. Continue to follow Him and your life will be richly blessed! The miracle of the method is that God uses ordinary people like you and me to accomplish extraordinary things for the sake of His kingdom. The miracle of the method is also that God is at work in our lives in ways that we do not understand. Therefore we must choose to trust Him.

My third response is:

3. Worship (11:36)

God does all things for His glory.

After describing all of this, it's as if Paul can't help but praise God in a way that summarizes it all: "**For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.**"

Our response to the miracle of the method is the same as Paul's, worship. We worship God because:

- a. He is the source of all things. "For of Him..."**
- b. He is the sustainer of all things. "...and through Him..."**
- c. He is the supreme purpose of all things. "...and to Him are all things."**

This Christmas experience the miracle of the method. Take a fresh look at how God sent His Son into the world and say, "Wow!" Stand in awe of the Son of God who came to die for our sins, and wonder! Bow before Him and worship! "**To Him be the glory forever! Amen.**" The first Christmas was full of worship. The

heavenly host proclaimed, "**Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!**" (Luke 2:14). The shepherds "**returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.**" (Luke 2:20). The magi "**saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him.**" (Matt. 2:11).

Worship is the natural response to the miracle of Christmas, the miracle of the method. Paul shows us what this worship consists of in the next verse. Worship is more than singing some songs, praying some prayers, or listening to a sermon. Worship is giving ourselves to God because He is worthy. Romans 12:1, "**I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.**"

Another version translates that verse, "**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.**" (NIV).

The miracle of the method must lead us to an explosive praise of doxology, where we say, Wow! That then leads us to wonder at what God does and is doing in us, which will lead us to a lifestyle of worship to the glory of God.

Prayer: God of the universe, heavenly Father, oh how wonderful You are. How great are Your riches, wisdom and knowledge. But we would also confess that it is impossible for us to completely understand Your methods. Your ways are not our ways, nor are Your thoughts our thoughts. We confess that many times we feel frustrated and confused by the things that happen in our lives. Thank You Father, that in Jesus Christ you have come for our good and Your glory. Help us to trust You even when we don't understand it all.

Lord, You have chosen to use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things for Your kingdom. Please use me. I ask You Lord to please take my life and use me in whatever way You decide in Your kingdom. I surrender myself to you now. Thank You for loving me through all You do. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.