

What's the Point of Learning About God?

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[0 : 0 0] As we turn to God's word let's pray. Dear God our Father we are so aware that as we come to Your Word we need Your help and we pray that You'd give us all an open heart and open ears to hear Your voice and may Your Word be written on our hearts and may it shape everything we do and may it all be to Your glory. Amen.

Well today we're carrying on our study in the letter to the Romans and we've come to the end of chapter 7 and after this week we're going to take a break because in many ways at the end of chapter 11 we reach the end of the first section of this letter. So we're going to pick it up again in January from chapter 12 but over the last three months we have covered a huge amount of ground in chapter 5 to 11 of this amazing letter and I hope that we've learned a lot because this section of Romans in fact the whole of chapters 1 to 11 sets before us a huge amount of teaching but as we've built up our study of that teaching and as I hope we've learned a lot we have to make sure that there's one thing that we don't forget and that's the truth that's been set before us in the very last verses of chapter 11 which is what we're going to study together today. Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God how unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways but who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been His counselor or who has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things to Him be glory forever. Amen. I'm sure you'll all remember that the letter to the Romans is basically divided into two parts I've shown you this slide before but that's a very brief and basic summary of the whole letter you got a brief introduction and a brief conclusion the main section is in two parts knowing the gospel and living the gospel so chapters 1 to 11 which we've been studying are primarily doctrine when we talk about doctrine we just mean teaching and so we're growing in our knowledge of God and in all that He has done and the second part from chapter 12 the bit we're going to come into in the new year is in many ways much more practical and that's that pattern that

Paul follows quite often you read his letters in the New Testament you'll often see the first half is kind of meaty theology and then very often in the second half of his letters he'll apply that to the lives of the people that he's writing to and that's reminding us that that theological knowledge and practical application always always go hand in hand it's never one or the other the two always go together what we know should always shape what we do. So chapters 1 to 11 have given us a huge amount of doctrinal teaching a lot of really meaty theology many of the great doctrines of the Christian faith are set out in this letter and I did a bit of a quick summary I sort of scanned through chapters 1 to 11 to see all the different doctrines that were taught all the different big chunks of teaching that it has before us and I've got a list for you it's not exhaustive I don't think but it's a big list these are all the things that Paul talks about okay we're gonna blast through them in 90 seconds okay he talks about the doctrine of sin that's where he starts he explains the tragic story of humanity in chapters 1 2 and the first half of chapter 3 where we've exchanged the truth of God for a lie we've rejected our creator we've started worshipping the creation itself and sin has had a catastrophic effect on this creation of God it's wrecked the world it's wrecked us as humans individually it's wrecked a relationship with each other it's left us broken lost and guilty and we are not righteous so God's standards are this perfect standard of righteousness and we don't meet it he is righteous we are not and we face a massive problem but then he goes on to talk about the amazing doctrine of justification chapters 3 and 4 tell us that instead of being condemned as we deserve we are pronounced righteous that's simply what justification means to be pronounced righteous that's made possible because of a glorious exchange that takes place at the cross his righteousness Christ's righteousness counted to us our sin counted to him that's what we mean by the third thing the doctrine of propitiation the fact that God's wrath is turned away from us and turned on to someone else whenever you see that big word propitiation it just means a turning away of wrath or of anger and so on the cross the punishment that we deserve was turned away from us and it was turned on to Jesus we benefit from that work through faith all that God asks of us is to trust in him so we are justified by faith and that's at the center of what Paul teaches in the early part of Romans but he also emphasizes that as amazing as justification is it is just the start just the start of a whole host of amazing blessings that flow from that he talks about redemption the fact that we are bought out of slavery that tells us two wonderful things one that if we trust in Jesus we are free absolutely free from the horrible power and penalty of sin and secondly it means that we now belong to

God he has bought us for himself reconciliation means that our relationship with God has been restored so back at the start we said that God's righteousness is here we are down here that means we're alienated but the doctrine of reconciliation tells us that that alienation has been exchanged for peace in other words you're no longer at enmity with God God is now your friend but he's not just your friend he's your father which is what the doctrine of adoption tells us God is your father God the father is your father God the son Jesus is your brother and that adoption is sealed by something what's it sealed by it's sealed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit God himself comes to dwell in you to guarantee and confirm and seal that adoption God himself comes to dwell in our hearts by his spirit which means quite simply that

God wants to be as close to you as he possibly can he comes to dwell within us and as the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us he begins our work that work is called sanctification whereby the Holy Spirit renews us and fixes us bit by bit so that we become more and more like Jesus we become conformed to the image of God's son so that we will ultimately bear the image of God perfectly and fulfill that purpose that God had in us from the beginning all of that process is grounded in the doctrine of election the amazing reassurance that God chooses us before we choose him God loves us before we love him our salvation is so so secure that election doesn't mean that the gospel is a fatalistic message which there's nothing we can do we just sit back and let God do it all on the contrary Romans also highlights to us that the gospel is freely offered to everyone to absolutely everyone we need to go out with that message and proclaim it and the climax of all of that is the doctrine of glorification a future event when Jesus returns and brings all his people to be with him in a perfect union and a perfect fellowship and where we can enjoy the glorious inheritance of the new heavens and the new earth and all of that is grounded in the doctrine of union with Christ the fact that by faith we are united to him which is why Paul says that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of

[8 : 53] God in Christ Jesus our Lord he's given us a massive amount of teaching now I want to really emphasize that that you are at the center of all of that teaching because if you put your trust in Jesus you are the one who was in the depths of sin broken and needy who Jesus through his work on the cross has enabled you to be pronounced righteous by God all you've had to do is put your faith in Jesus and this extraordinary transformation takes place you go from being in the depths of sin to being justified pronounced righteous you're freed from sin your relationship with God is restored you're brought right up into the state it's not just of the friend of God but the child of God confirmed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who's working in you renewing you making you more and more and more like Jesus all of which is grounded on God's eternal choice to love you and to hold you and to save you he can use you to proclaim that free offer of the gospel and it's ultimately pointing towards this amazing future where you will be in the new heavens in the new earth with Jesus and with all our brothers and sisters in Jesus in Christ to enjoy so many incredible blessings it's all for you it's all for you but that's not all that

Paul talks about because he also talks about God and if you go through Romans one to eleven he talks about so many things about God God's righteousness kindness truth law purpose wrath power judgment faithfulness glory promise will word calling mercy grace love that's all in Romans one to eleven these chapters are so incredibly full and we have to ask ourselves what's the point of learning all that stuff about God why should we learn all this doctrine what effect should all of this have on us well the end of chapter 11 shows us that learning all of that stuff should make us say wow oh the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God how unsearchable at his judgments and how inscrutable at his ways there's no wonder Paul says these words when he's taught all that incredible doctrine in these 11 chapters and it's a great reminder that the goal of theology is not knowledge the goal of theology is worship and like Paul we want to reach the end of this chapter and fall on her knees and and worship the

God who has been so incredibly incredibly good to us and this is reminding us of a really really important point the letter to the Romans is arguably the richest theological document that's ever been written the depths of theology in this letter are vast and it's easy to think that it's all beyond us that the doctrine in Romans is too much for people like us but who was Romans written to was it written to minister to professor to students of theology no Romans was written to ordinary people like you and that's because all this stuff is what Paul and ultimately what God wants you to know and the truth is when we see the astounding transformation that all these doctrines explain for us it's impossible not to look at all and just say wow but the crucial point is that that doctrine isn't there for us to say wow isn't it good to have all this knowledge no it's there for us to say wow isn't it so good to have this God and these verses at the end of Romans 11 give us amazing words of praise for the

God who has transformed us and made us his own and so these chapters have contained just a vast amount of incredibly rich teaching explaining just how huge Jesus's salvation is and when you reach the end of Romans 11 I suppose you can do two things you can join in Paul and worship God like that or but you can say to God no I don't really want that and I don't really want you God forbid that any of us would come to that kind of conclusion so these verses are a brilliant expression of praise to God and that's always the effect that our doctrine should have the whole point of learning about God is to love him worship him glorify him and enjoy him forever and that's why these words are a great way to conclude the first half of Romans that a great general expression of praise and worship but they're more than just a general expression of praise and if we actually look at these verses together that we'll see that even in these verses of praise and worship we're actually being taught more amazing stuff there's more for us to learn in these four verses and that's what I want us just to do together for the next week while is just look verse by verse at what these verses are teaching us what's Paul saying well he starts off by saying oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God how uncircable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways now before we go into this verse I'm going to say there's a there's a teensy we translation issue in this version it's not a crucial one but if you have an NIV in front of you and you'll see that the verse is just a tiny bit different the NIV says oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God ESV says depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge and God you might say well that doesn't seem to make a huge difference and it doesn't really the only issue is that the ESV if you look at it is telling us to think about the depth of three things riches wisdom and knowledge the NIV is telling us to think about the depth of riches of two things wisdom and knowledge there's not a huge difference but you can see I just wanted to explain that in case any of you did have an NIV in front of you because without going into it too much the ESV is the slightly more literal translation which I think I think is I prefer it I think it's a weird not that the NIV is bad but I do think that that Paul wants us to think about three things he wants us to think about riches wisdom and knowledge and so that's what we're going to focus on just for a wee minute each of these things because Paul is making a really important point first of all he tells us to think about the depth of these things now that word depth is really important it's pointing us to the idea of immensity and inexhaustible abundance something that's really deep really abundant there's an inexhaustible abundance that applies to these three things God's riches God's wisdom and

God's knowledge so what are God's riches anyway it's the kind of thing that's really easy to say isn't it we say all the depths of God's riches but what exactly what do we mean when we talk about that because when we talk about riches we tend to think about material wealth but that's a very narrow view of of riches because in broader terms and I think really in more serious terms riches refer to things that are valuable I'm going to use an illustration now that only people in their 30s will probably get and so the rest you will have to bear with me so way back in the 90s there was a famous American actor called Macaulay Culkin yes so famous most of all for home alone but he was also in a film called Richie Rich great forget Lord of the Rings Richie Rich good film and his parents were super duper rich and they had this vault where they kept all their most valuable things and there was this sort of person who managed their affairs who was like that whatever that household manager who the parents didn't realize this but he was actually out to steal from them and although he was supposed to be looking after their stuff actually he wanted to steal from them and he arranged I think for the parents to be to try and get them killed so he could steal everything that was in this vault and the whole point of the film is that he's trying to get in the vault and we Macaulay Culkin saves the day as he would but the climax of the film is they finally get into this vault where this super billionaire keeps all his riches and they get in there and what do they find they find teddy bear shunt photos and an old broken pram from when Macaulay Culkin was we and the parents come back and they say yeah this is the stuff that really is valuable to us and the guy who tried to steal it was horrified but it's true there's a really important point there that that we tend to think of wealth in terms of material things but but the true stuff that's valuable is often not money or stuff so what is truly valuable to God because it's certainly not wealth or jewels or property what does God value well God values kindness patience forbearance grace and love Paul talks about that early in the letter he talks about the riches of God's kindness of his forbearance of his patience and he is reminding us in this verse here that these things in God his kindness his patience his love these are the things that are really valuable and they are inexhaustibly deep and one of the great tragedies of humanity today is that we pour pour all our energy into gaining riches that really are very very shallow so the clothes we wear the car we drive the house we own the salary we take home do any of these things really have depth to them when you lie in your deathbed will you say I wish I had earned more or will you say I wish I had loved more the world is busy chasing shallow riches but in the gospel God is offering us true riches joy peace hope security love and this verses reminding us that these riches in God are riches that are inexhaustibly deep so will God's patience with you his kindness his love

[20 : 53] ever run dry never deep what about the depth of God's wisdom you ever asked that question how deep is God's wisdom what we mean by that well we look at ourselves often our wisdom reaches its limits so we face situations that seem really hard to overcome even in practical terms we face a circumstance where nobody really knows what to do I think that I don't not make any political judgments at all but I do think that the Brexit referendum really left Britain in the situation where we're like we don't actually know what to do and none of us really know what to do from the top of politics to the bottom none of us actually know what to do and it's the same in so many other situations in life you look at homes and communities that are so broken you look at people whose lives are so just absolutely tangled up in a web of all sorts of horrible stuff and you think we just need wisdom because we don't know what to do and very quickly our wisdom reaches its limit and that's why humanity has never been able to solve the problem of humanity never the same keep keep same problems keep coming up again and again and again our wisdom reaches its limit God's wisdom is inexhaustibly deep and so we find ourselves even just looking at specific situations and we think we don't know what to do so you think of the whole issue of just of corruption as an example how do we fix that humanity can't fix that take one specific example and it's too hard for us God looks at the whole universe he looks at everything that sin has wrecked everything that is broken and he says I'll fix it and all those doctrines we were looking at are part of this glorious perfect plan where God has pieced every step together in order to fix it to perfectly fix it all of that centers on Jesus Christ in whom everything fits together as a perfect plan of salvation it all comes from the deep deep wisdom of God which means that no matter how much of a mess your life is in God will never ever ever say I don't know what to do his wisdom is deep enough to help you often when people's lives are in a mess we'll say they're in the depths that's an expression that we tend to use and because they're just so low they're in serious trouble we can often say they're too far gone well no one no one is too far gone for God and nobody is in the depths far down enough for it not to be deep enough for God's wisdom to reach and then there's the depth of God's knowledge how deep is God's knowledge well at one level that refers to what we call the fact that God is omniscient the fact that he knows all things and we read and sang about that in Psalm 139 there is an inexhaustible depth to the knowledge of God he knows how many stars there are he knows the number of hairs on our head he knows every detail of every square inch of this vast vast universe always remember that every single scientific discovery that's made is just finding out the stuff that God already knows but I want to focus in particular on the great truth that

Psalm 139 presents to us because Sam 139 doesn't just say that God knows all things it emphasizes most of all that God knows us all Lord you have searched me and known me and it's reminding you that God's knowledge of you is inexhaustibly deep so he knows your story he knows your hurts he knows your fears he knows your needs your hopes your dreams he knows it all and if God was like us if God was like people then that would make us feel very very uncomfortable because if everybody in here knew everything about me if you knew all of my mistakes all the stupid things that I've done in my life all the insecurities that I have if you all knew that then I would be emigrating probably to Antarctica and that's why just as an aside that that's why it is so hideously cruel when social media exposes people stupid mistakes to the whole world and the young people in here always always remember that if somebody if you see evidence of someone doing something really stupid just just get rid of the evidence never show it to the world if if God was like us his knowledge of us would make us very uncomfortable but but thankfully thankfully God is not like us

God knows us so deeply but the reason he knows us so deeply is what it's because he loves us so much so when we are vulnerable vulnerable before God we are never taking him by surprise. Callum led us in a prayer of confession and that's a really important thing to pray prayers of confession to acknowledge your sins before God but the word for confession in the New Testament is a really interesting word because literally it means to say the same thing so when we confess our sins to God we can easily be afraid because we think that we're going to shock God into hating us so if you tell God about the stupid thing that you did even in your mind then you're going to shock him into hating you but the truth is when we confess our sins to God we're simply telling him what he already knows we are acknowledging and agreeing that we've made mistakes and we're on the path to healing never ever ever forget that

God's knowledge of you is inexhaustibly deep and that's why you can go into this week with a brilliant prayer one of my favorite prayers that's only two words long you know and so if going to work tomorrow morning is a horrible thought you can say Lord you know God's riches of kindness grace and patience are inexhaustibly deep God's wisdom for dealing with the problems we face is inexhaustibly deep God's knowledge of you is so personal so intimate so loving it is inexhaustibly deep and then Paul asks two questions two great questions which are actually taken from the Old Testament one from Isaiah 40 the other one from Job 35 he says who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been as counselor or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid these are two really interesting questions the first one emphasizes in many ways it reinforces the point that he's just made that God's wisdom and knowledge is far far deeper than ours that again is pointing us to the world view that runs through the whole of this letter the fact that God is Creator and we are His creation and that Creator creation distinction is reminding us that even the greatest achievements of human knowledge a tiny compared to God there's a brilliant diagram that displays this God is Creator we are creation you look at the highest points of human knowledge they're just a teensy spec in the we circle God's knowledge is so so so much bigger that's why when it comes to this verse it's absolutely crazy to think that we could be God's counselor or that we could tell him what to do or that as the second question says that we could pay him something as a repayment and we could tie in in some ways make him indebted to us it's utterly bonkers to think that we can tell God what to do or to think that we could bargain with God because we have what he needs it is theologically absurd and yet we do it all the time so people constantly think that they can tell God what to do don't they and so humanity today I think often expects God to remove everything from our lives that we don't like so stuff that we don't like we expect God to take it away but at the very same time we expect God to ignore the fact that our lives are full of things that he doesn't like we expect God to give us all the blessings and yet at the same time we expect to be resolved absolved from all responsibility we think the whole world thinks they can tell God what to do people also think that they can give God a gift that he might be repaid and when you read that I think well what's twice Paul talking about that well he's talking about it because it's something that people do all the time because countless people base their eternal security on the fact that they've been a pretty good person and that that will be a good enough payment to God and you have to make sure that both of these actions are deadly make sure you recognize that both of these actions are deadly you can't tell God what to do he is God he is creator so even the

most basic level of common sense tells you that your job is not to tell him what to do your job is to listen to what he says to us and in exactly the same way we can't pay God we can't bargain with him and the reason you can't pay God is because you simply can't it's just impossible a human a tiny speck in that creation cannot make a payment to the Creator and that's reminding us of a really really important point that God is not a barterer because very often in life our dealings come down to bartering we think if you give me this I'll do that we haggle I'll do this you do that so we want to get the best deals in our purchases we want to try and get in there at work with a good impression to our colleagues or to our supervisors we want to impress our friends with stuff and the hope that it'll give us a sense of worth we think that if we use our powers of persuasion if we do this do that things will go well we'll get this we'll get that we can easily go through life like that and we can easily think that in a similar way we need to kind of get in there with God and persuade him to want to like us and persuade him to want to save us but God is not a barterer and that of course means that God is never manipulated you can't get the better of God it also means that you can't earn your salvation as some kind of deal we can't manipulate him we can't bargain with him we can't persuade him it's utterly non-negotiable in that sense we cannot manipulate God but the amazing truth is you don't have to you don't have to haggle with God because the gospel is not about bartering the gospel is far far better than that it's impossible for us to pay for our salvation which is precisely why God does not ask us to pay for our salvation instead he says you can have it as a free gift that's the only logical possibility in terms of restoring our relationship with God that he would initiate it and that's exactly what he's done God offers us a perfect salvation as a free gift not by works not by our payment not by our persuasion it's a free gift from the abundant grace of God and that's a great reminder that you don't have to persuade God to give him your affection you don't have to persuade God to like you because so often we feel even as

[34 : 41] Christians that we need to kind of pay God or repay God for him to love us and the fact that we muck up every week means that God is probably going to feel pretty disappointed with us at the very best of times because that's so often how people deal with us we think that we need to kind of tie and earn God's affection but it's not true because God's affection is inexhaustibly deep it's like an ocean God's love for you is like an ocean and so if you imagine going up to God and standing beside this vast ocean of his love would you really say to him Lord can I buy a wee bit of this ocean and take it with me and so you'd get a bucket and pick up this wee bit of ocean that you've paid and you've gone away from it would you really do that no when you go to the ocean you don't take a piece of ocean away with you do you what do you do you just jump in and that's what we do with God's love we just jump in and let him pour his love and affection all over us God's affection for you is already there it's inexhaustibly deep he wants you to just enjoy it so you don't need to tell

God what to do and you don't need to earn your favor with him as some kind of repayment and then last of all Paul says for from him and through him and to him are all things to him be glory forever I just want to say one thing about this verse often when we look at the Bible we're drawn to the big words aren't we so when we had that big list of doctrines at the start of the sermon it was loads and loads and loads of big words and the big words are brilliant but I want you to never forget that the little words in the Bible are brilliant too and there's three little words in this verse that are crucial there are tiny words in in Greek one of them is a wee bit bigger in English but they're still little words from through and to and these three words these three prepositions remind you that from start to finish our salvation your salvation is God's work so it's initiated from him it's his plan his initiative his provision it's accomplished through him he paid the price he took her sin he paid the debt he made the sacrifice he finished the work and it's all leading to him the great goal of the gospel message is the perfect fullness of worship and fellowship in and love in the presence of God forever God does it all he initiates it he achieves it he will consummate it our salvation and the whole of history all things are from him through him and to him and as a result what does God get he gets the glory he gets the glory and rightly so because the fact that God has done it means that all the glory goes to him that's why there is no place whatsoever for pride or arrogance in the gospel we don't come to God and say how great we are we just come and recognize the amazing work that he has done and the fact that he gets the glory but if God gets all the glory what do we get what does verse 36 give us often in life when other people get the glory we can feel insecure can't we so sometimes maybe you'll have a maybe you'll have a set of exams and your whole class might do quite well but one person will do really well and as much as we try to be delighted for that person it's hard not to think oh I'm locked up and we feel insecure same maybe in sport if one person in the team is really good they get the glory and we can feel insecure maybe at work someone gets a promotion ahead of you they get the glory we feel insecure it's so easy to feel like that

I'm guilty of feeling like that at times often in life when others get the glory we feel insecure but that does not happen in the gospel that's one of the amazing things about the gospel because in that verse the fact that it's from God through God and to God the fact that he's the one who does it all and the fact that he's the one who gets the glory means that we you get perfect eternal security because the very fact that it's from through and to God means that if you trust in Jesus you are utterly secure and eternally safe because he has done it all God gets all the glory and for that very reason you can have eternal security and that's the amazing thing about the gospel at no point does it rely on us at every point it relies on Jesus back in Carlisle way I had a wonderful elder whose name was Angus but everybody called him choppy the Isle of Lewis most people are called Angus so everyone needs a nickname so he was called choppy and choppy is a very dear friend of mine and choppy had an amazing conversion how in his late 40s early 50s from a life where he had struggled with with alcohol he had been saved and he used to love telling his testimony and he would talk about all the different things that God did in bringing him to faith in Jesus Christ and at the end he would always say this and the best thing about it God did it and we're all the same because we come together to worship we come together as

Christians and the best thing is that God has done it all that makes it perfect that means the devil has no chance of taking it away from you and that means we can go on and live for him knowing that everything is from him through him to him so to him be the glory or ever amen let's pray God we just want to give you the glory because everything that we have is from you through you and to you God our Father Jesus our Savior Holy Spirit our Comforter to you be glory now and forever amen