

DON'T BE A SMART AIR BAG

ROMANS 11:33-36

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! "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

Today, we live in the midst of an information explosion. Never has the average person been privy to so much knowledge. With the internet and the click of a mouse, vast storehouses of data are at our fingertips.

In the year 1292, the Sorbonne Library in Paris was home for 1,338 handwritten books. The library's cache' of literature represented 90% of the accumulation of man's wisdom for the previous several thousand years.

Today, over four times that many books - nearly 6000 books - are published in the world every single day.

Rewind the clock 100 years ago, and today's edition of an Atlanta Journal contains more information than a person living in 1919 would see in a lifetime. There's a volcano of knowledge erupting all around us.

Social commentator, Chris Kimball, points out that in the early half of the 1900s you had to have "guts." Courage and drive were what society valued most...

In the latter half of the 20th century, you had to have "heart."

Sensitivity and self-expression were the coveted characteristics of American culture...

But now, in the 21st century, Kimball says that the organ of emphasis **is the "brains."** Today, you've got to be smart! Intelligence is the most desired human trait.

There is though a danger with this ascendance of intelligence - man can become so smart that he thinks he's catching up with God. *Don't be foolish!*

All our knowledge is a speck, on top of a speck, on top of a speck compared to God's superiority.

I love Isaiah 40:15. It's a passage that puts us in our place. The prophet says that compared to our great God... **"the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the balance; Look, (God) lifts up the isles (or continents) as a very little thing."**

A while back, I saw a headline in the USA Today newspaper entitled, **"Federal Officials look at smart air bag technology."** The article discussed the high-tech development of computer sensors that help in the safe deployment of air bags in cars in the event of a crash.

But what captured my attention were the three words in the headline, **"smart air bag."** It hit me... I know a lot of folks who could be classified as **"smart air bags."**

In fact, the person who deceives himself into thinking that he can question God's wisdom - or that God needs his help or counsel - is nothing but **a smart air bag!**

Religious and secular historians alike consider **the Apostle**

Paul as one of the most brilliant human minds who ever lived. In addition to his natural, intellectual prowess, God revealed volumes of spiritual insight to Paul. Of the 27 NT books, Paul wrote over half. He was given the lion's share of New Covenant theology.

God entrusted Paul with a mountain of strategic truth... When I get to heaven, I'm planning on a very long sit-down conversation with the Apostle Paul.

Yet in our text today, Paul concludes that what God had revealed to him was just a thimble full of wisdom - compared to the endless ocean of divine truth.

In essence, Paul was living under an eyedropper while buckets of truth were yet to be emptied.

We consider Paul the greatest theologian of all time, but Paul saw himself as having barely scratched the surface! He'd lowered a bucket into a bottomless well.

It's amazing that Paul's confession of naivety comes after some of his deepest theological thoughts.

Romans 9-11 are mind-grinding theology - it'll fry the gray matter. It's some of the weightiest, most cerebral arguments ever advanced. You'd think when Paul finally shifts gears he'd pat himself on the back for such profundity, but no! After applying himself to the knowledge of God what impresses Paul most was *not how much he knew* but *how much there is to know!*

Stretching out his mind towards God expanded his heart for God. God's grandeur, his wisdom and workings stirred Paul's heart and endeared him to *the God he served but would*

never fully understand.

And Paul's *contemplation* was rewarded with both a greater *adoration* - and a strengthened *dedication*. Our contemplation of these verses will do the same for us.

In the last four verses of Romans 11, Paul looks in three directions: to **the depths of God's wisdom** - to **the height of God's ways** – and to **the center of God's will!**

Wisdom so deep, ways so high, a will so prevalent... none of us can completely grasp it all. Paul wants to make certain that none of us become *"smart air bags."*

First, let's look at **the depth of God's wisdom.**

Let's read again verse 33, **"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"**

Knowledge involves gathering of information.

Wisdom is the skill to use the information that's been gathered... God is rich in both wisdom and knowledge!

I'm not being irreverent when I say this... but **God is the one, true "know-it-all!"** Nothing is hidden from Him.

God is never surprised by new findings or new developments. He knows everything there is to know. He's capable of learning nothing. The theologians say God is **"omniscient"** - the term means **"all-knowing."**

And God is also **all-wise!**

He's never perplexed, or stumped, or baffled, or caught off-guard. There's no problem He can't solve. No riddle He can't answer. No knot He can't untangle.

In his book "The Knowledge of the Holy," AW Tozer writes this about the nature of the God we serve, "God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits... all laws, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret... all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth..." *I suppose that sums it up!*

God is like an artist constantly at His best. He never has an off-day. God is a ceaseless stream of creativity, and understanding, and perfect application.

God's knowledge and wisdom would exceed the brightest human even if that person had no blind spots, no creative lulls, no bouts with depression, no need to sleep - and God is not subject to the frustration of aging.

His powers don't diminish over time. His perfections never change! God is always at peak performance.

The genius of our Lord Jesus was His ability to take imponderable truths and make them easily understood and applicable. In other words, "He put the cookies on the bottom shelf." I like what one author observes, "We take simple truths and make them profound, whereas Jesus took profound truths and made them simple."

God's truth is so simple a first grader can read the Bible and through it enter into a saving relationship with Jesus while a skilled theologian can meditate on the same passage and uncover layer upon layer of new insight never exhausting its usefulness. God's truth is both simple and profound at the same time.

As the old adage reads, "The Bible is a river of truth in which the wisest man can never touch bottom, and yet the simplest child can never drown."

When my son was 5 years old, as we were driving home, he asked me, "Dad, what are we going to talk about?" I suggested we talk about the different areas of our lives - how things were going with our family, with friends, with God. When I suggested, "Let's talk about life," he shook his head, "Ah Dad, that's complicated!"

And life can get complicated... for a 5-year-old or for a 60-year-old. If you haven't noticed, life is not always a smooth, seamless progression. It has ups and downs.

Often circumstances arise that are hard to explain.

There are moments when we wonder if God has lost control - if He's fallen asleep at the wheel. Sometimes we conclude God made a mistake. In the face of life's complications, we can jump to the wrong conclusions!

It reminds me of the bunny rabbit and the snake. Both animals were orphans and blind from birth.

Once they were traveling through the forest when the bunny tripped over the snake. The rabbit apologized, "I'm so sorry. I'm blind so I didn't see you. In fact, I'm also an orphan and I don't even know what I am."

The snake answered, *"That's interesting. I have a similar story... Tell you what I could do. I could slither all over you, size you up - then tell you what you are."*

The bunny said, "Great." So the snake slithered all over the rabbit's body. When he was done, he concluded, "Well, you're

covered with fur, you have really long ears, you're nose twitches, and you have a soft cotton tail... You must be a bunny rabbit."

The bunny was so grateful he wanted to return the favor. "Maybe I could feel all over you with my paw, and do for you what you've done for me today?"

The snake said, *"Please, if you would."*

When the bunny was done, he concluded, "You're smooth and slippery, you have a forked-tongued, and no backbone... I'd say you must be a politician."

Here's my point, sometimes things happen in the dark - our perspective is dim - we don't see all the factors at play - and unless we're careful we can draw the wrong conclusions from just our circumstances.

Corrie Ten Boon stated, "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer."

Just because you're in the dark this morning - and don't understand what's going on in your life - don't assume that God is in the same situation. He's not!

So often, God is working behind the scenes of our life - incognito. God is *all-knowing* and *all-wise*.

God never *miscalculates*. He never *crosses dates* or *arrives late*. When you're passing through the darkness, trust that God is always on time and in control!

Yet, sometimes like the rabbit, we can draw an erroneous conclusion. We can assume that it's finally happened - *that*

God has made his first mistake!

Years ago, just before his election, former Atlanta mayor Bill Campbell, made a mistake that almost cost him the race. *It would be the first of many mistakes...*

The AJC reported it this way, "Mayoral candidate Bill Campbell made a misstep that even a friend conceded was *"major"* at the standing room only funeral last week of Rev. Aric B. Flemming at Mount Carmel Baptist Church. Speaking before a crowd of 7,000 at the funeral, Campbell characterized the death of the 22-year-old Fleming in a car accident as a *"mistake,"* causing a hush of dismay to fall over churchgoers.

We spoke to a half-dozen attendees, including two ministers who explained that Campbell's statement undermined their belief that God is all-wise and all-knowing, which is why it created such a stir...

The article went on... "Antioch Baptist's Cameron Alexander... rebuked Campbell at the funeral, earning applause and *"Amens"* when he said God never makes mistakes *and wasn't running for re-election."*

The next week, an embarrassed Campbell returned to the same church apologizing to the Mount Carmel congregation for doubting God's wisdom and love.

Yet I'm afraid, many of us owe God an apology for the times we've questioned and doubted His wisdom...

On how many occasions have you wondered if what God was doing in your life was actually *a mistake?*

I love the three words in Exodus 14:21. You recall the story... Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt and to the banks of the Red Sea. But the Egyptians had a change of heart. Their army chased them to the edge of the ocean. A fiery cloud held off the army all night.

But what a long night it was... Imagine, the Hebrews waiting for the morning light. What would happen? The sea in front of them - angry Egyptians on their heels?

Verse 14 tells us, "the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind **all that night**, and made the sea into dry land..." Note the three words, "**all that night...**" ***While they were waiting, God was working.***

God was working in the dark to accomplish the people's deliverance. To the Hebrews, it was lights out, but God's plan unfolded under the cover of darkness. *And this is how God often works in our lives.*

It reminds me of the little boy who was scared of the dark. Late one night his mother asked him to fetch the broom off the back porch. He balked, "But mom, it's dark out there." The mother told him, "*Honey, don't worry Jesus is always with you. He's with you wherever you go - even when you're in the dark.*"

The little guy walked to the back door, cracked it open just a fraction, then called out, "Hey Jesus, if you're out there, how about handing me that broom?"

Hey, **Jesus is with us even in the dark places.**

Oh, never underestimate the depth of God's wisdom, but Paul also looks to **the height of God's ways.**

Verse 33 “How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?” In other words, when you check the universe’s pecking order, you’ll find God at the top of the heap.

Look to the tallest mountain - the precipice of the world - there you’ll find Jesus. He is the king of the hill!

No one can ascend to God's rung on the ladder. He looks up to no one, he looks down on everyone...

Verses 34-35 use three rhetorical questions to show that God has **no colleagues, no counselors, no creditors!** He never needs help - *never has, never will.*

Hypothetically speaking, if God did ever have a problem where He needed help, where would He turn?

There's no one who really *knows* His concerns.

Nowhere for Him to *go* for counsel.

Nobody to whom He owes an explanation... God is the one and only person who is truly on His own!

Understand, God has **no colleagues.** Paul asks in verse 34, “**For who has known the mind of the LORD?**”

God has no equals. He's peerless. Put Him in a line-up, and trust me, you can pick Him out! No one thinks on God's level, or sees things from His perspective.

Go into the nursery this morning and start up a conversation with the babies on the subject of quantum physics or Einstein's theory of relativity.v“Goo-goo, ga-ga” is all they’ll

say on the subject, yet those babies come closer to explaining the complexities of particle physics than we come to fully explaining God.

The sum of all our knowledge is little more than a "goo-goo" or a "ga-ga," compared to the vastness of God. What we know of God would be zero if He hadn't chosen to reveal Himself through His Word, the Bible.

In Isaiah 55:8-9, the prophet speaks for our unlimited God, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways... for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

God has no colleagues and He has no counselors. Paul asks, "Or who has become His counselor?"

There are many people, including you and me, who on occasion have tried to counsel God. How often do our prayers consist of offering God suggestions...

"God, I need a new job, and here's how we can do it..."
"Lord, I'm tired of being single. I need somebody to marry, and I've got just the right one picked out..."

"God, it's time my spouse and I had a baby - we're tired of waiting - we want one now!..." Without realizing it, our *prayer life* can become a *suggestion box*.

Realize, God has been in charge of the universe for a long time and He hasn't suddenly begun to need your help! He's not looking for *your guidance* or *helpful hints*... but what He is expecting is *your allegiance*.

A good dancer knows you can't lead and follow at the same

time. One partner leads, the other follows.

And the same is true in our relationship with God. *And guess who's expected to follow?... It's always me!*

It's been said, "Just as there is foolish wisdom, so there is wise ignorance. Don't pry into God's Ark. Don't inquire into things not revealed. I'm happy that God makes me a member of His court - not of His council."

Here's another way to say it, "When God puts down a period, don't you change it to a question mark!"

We have no right to expect God to consult us before He makes decisions. He's not obligated to solicit our opinion before He makes moves that affect our lives.

God is God... He's not applying for the job! God owes us no explanations. *God has no counselors.*

And God also has no creditors... Verse 35, "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?"

Hey, God *loves you*, but He doesn't owe *you*!

Too many Americans grow up believing the God of the Bible is the author of the American dream. That somewhere in Scripture God has obligated Himself to provide us a good job (with benefits), a higher salary than our dad, weekends off, a fat savings account, a split-level, a spouse, 2.8 kids, and a dog and a cat.

Certainly, God *loves us* and He wants to give good gifts to His kids, but God doesn't owe *you spit*! His gifts and blessings are never something we deserve.

This was what Job failed to realize. He thought God owed

him an explanation for the terrible calamities that had befallen him. "In demanding *why*, Job lost his way."

He resented God's behind-the-scene movements. He wanted God to come out in the open and speak to him like a man. He got quite proud and arrogant.

Job reminds me of pro golfer, Tommy Bolt. He was known for his *sweet swings* and his *terrible temper*.

Once, after lipping the cup on six straight putts, Bolt threw his club, shook his fist to heaven, and shouted at God, "Why don't you come out and fight like a man!"

Author Phillip Yancey has a chapter in one of his books that he entitles, "*Arms too Short to Box with God.*"

This describes both Tommy Bolt and Job. Both were foolish enough to think they could duke it out with God... *but Paul knew better*. He realized his arms were far too short to box with God. He didn't even try.

Paul faced unanswered questions in his own life, but rather than *resent* God's hidden purposes, He *rejoiced*.

Job got *mad* at what he didn't understand, Paul *marveled*. Job *pouted*, Paul *praised*. Here in Romans 11, Paul expresses His trust in God's *wisdom and ways*!

JB Phillips once wrote, "If God were small enough to figure out, He wouldn't be big enough to be worshipped." I take great consolation in the fact I could never decipher out all there is to know about God.

Think about it... If you and I could figure out God with our little pea brains, He sure isn't much of a God.

Embrace God and you've got a tiger by the tail!

God is not going to play by your rules or do business on your terms. There's an old saying I love, "If you dance with a grizzly bear, you better let him lead."

And this is true of God. King Solomon said it best, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

Once a little boy was drawing a picture of God. His mom tried to set him straight, "Son, you can't draw a picture of God. No one knows what He looks like."

Unfazed, he replied, "They will when I get through."

I've met too many Christians, like this little boy, who think they've got God all figured out. They'll condemn everybody who disagrees with their interpretation.

Rather than let God be God, they limit Him to their own logic. All human beings are capable at times of stuffing God into the box of our own ignorance.

Verse 33 tells us God's wisdom is "unsearchable and his ways past finding out." The NAS translation uses the terms "unsearchable" and "unfathomable."

Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God..." Mystical Jews have a name for God, they call Him "En Sof" or "without limit."

God is *infinite*, man is *finite* – and that presents a problem. How can our *limited mind* discern the *limitless God*? It's obvious, God's wisdom is "unsearchable."

This is why man could never discover God on his own. God is never found! God's wisdom and truth are beyond our reach,

thus it has to be revealed to us.

When my kids were tots, we'd play hide and seek. And I was a pretty clever hider. I could hide in places where the kids would never find me, but that wasn't the point. The fun wasn't staying hid... it was getting found.

And this how God feels. You don't find God. He makes Himself *findable*! He's revealed Himself to us.

Your search for God would've ended in despair had God not chosen to reveal Himself to you.

The knowledge of God comes to us... not through *investigation*, but *revelation*. We learn of God and experience Him, not because we've reached up to pull Him down, but because He has stooped down to us.

In His grace, God has simplified His wisdom. He's made Himself knowable through His Word.

God has taken His unbounded, limitless knowledge and wisdom and dressed it in the straight-jacket of finite language and limited logic. The passage I quoted earlier, Deuteronomy 29:29, concludes, "The secret things belong to the LORD... but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever..."

God's wisdom is not only "unsearchable," but also "unfathomable." The Greek word means "untraceable."

The steps God takes - the logic He uses - the grids through which He analyzes situations - don't always show up on our radar! The TSA scanners at the airport can detect an array of items but not the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 77 discusses the mysterious parting of the Red Sea. The psalm says of God, "The voice of Your thunder was in the whirlwind; the lightnings lit up the world, the earth trembled and shook. Your way was in the sea, Your path in the great waters, and Your footsteps were not known." *It was all over our head!*

I believe one of the chief reasons for the "*here and now*" is to teach us *to trust God even when we can't trace Him*. When the storms of life blow across the sands of time and God's footprint disappears from our view, what do we do? Do we still trust that He's there?

Always remember, "*What's over my head is still under God's feet.*" I like this prayer, "*I cannot grasp Your mind, but with my whole heart, I trust Your love!*"

Paul looked to the depth of God's wisdom, and the height of God's ways, finally he looks to the center of God's will. Verse 36, "*For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.*"

The deeper Paul probes into the world around him he sees God's purposes carried out in all areas of life.

God is the hub - the axis around which everything else in life spins! God's prevailing presence and providence - His overarching plans - will never fail.

At the heart of every situation stands God! God's architectural stamp is on the plans for the universe.

All that happens is "*of Him.*" Look and you'll see God's name written in the corner of the canvas. It's etched on the base of the vase. He's artist and architect. He makes all

things beautiful in His time.

The universe is also **"through Him."** He is the **means and motive** behind all the natural forces that combine to make life happen. He's author and finisher of creation. The ebbs and flows of life start and end with God. All things come from Him and return to Him.

And all things are **"to Him."** God is the *planner*, the *means*, and **the ambition of all things!** God is the single thread that weaves throughout the universe and ties all things together. Everything is to His praise. The drama we call *"life"* ultimately ends in bringing Him glory.

In those times when a tornado touches down and wipes out an entire town, we wonder how can this be **"of Him, and through Him, and to Him,"** yet the Bible declares that it is! Right now we see as in a glass dimly, but ultimately, all things will work to His glory.

Verse 36 reminds me of the Sunday breakfast when the little boy had too much waffle and too little time to eat that waffle. His parents were late for church so they rushed him out of the house. Rather than waste a perfectly good waffle the little guy stuck it in his pocket.

He figured he could finish it later that morning.

At church, the pastor talked about the omnipresence of God. He's everywhere, at all times. This upset the boy. Half-way through the sermon, he prayed, **"God, if you're in my pocket, please don't eat my waffle."**

Hey, God is in our pockets - or better yet - we're in His pocket! Life is God's idea, and whether we realize it or not,

He's involved in all that happens... There is evil in the world that accounts for a lot of bad stuff. But both *the good and the bad* are at the very least allowed by God and is ultimately intended for His glory.

It's been said, "God is an infinite circle whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere."

God is not only at the center of *the world* - He's at the center of *your world* and *my world*... whether we acknowledge it or not. *God is Creator and Craftsman and King*. If you want a full and meaningful life, stop ignoring God! Instead, revolve your world around Him.

Let me close with a true story...

A young naval officer, on his first overseas assignment, had orders by the captain to initiate the launch of the massive ship. With a stream of decisive commands, he had the deck buzzing with activity.

In record time, the mammoth ship left the dock and steamed out into the channel. The young ensign was proud of the good job he'd done. He was surprised when he got a radio communication from the captain.

It read, "My personal congratulations upon completing your underway preparation exercise according to the book and with amazing speed. In your haste, however, you have overlooked one of the unwritten rules - make sure the captain is aboard before getting underway." The same is true in our lives!

You can be a Christian. Your deck can be busy and buzzing with activity - even church-related activity.

Hey, look at me... I'm taking charge, and barking orders, and getting lots and lots of stuff done.

You think you're running the ship just fine by yourself. *But don't be a smart air bag!* Before you set sail make sure the captain's onboard and at the helm.

Blaise Pascal once stated, *"I love God because I know Him, but I adore Him because I cannot comprehend Him."* *Who are we up against God!*

Look deep into *God's wisdom.*

Look high at *God's ways.*

Look all around at *God's will.*

Come down off your high horse... A little humility goes a long, long way. You're not your own captain!

Let me read verse 36 one more time. You join me on the last word, *"For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever... Amen."*