

BEYOND WORDS BY MEANS OF WORDS: Paul's Experience and Expression of the Divine Mystery¹

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On to a Final Silence

Romans 11:33–36

Compared with other letters, the one Paul addressed to the Romans lacks drama. The tone is quiet, objective, and controlled. For this reason, rightly or wrongly, individual interpreters have read the letter as a theological tractate, a literary genre dependent on impersonal objectivity. Yet even here the apostle mentions several times, one after another, shouts, cries of need, and groanings. But he does so in a purely descriptive way, as if he were observing them only from without. Even when he writes, “we ourselves . . . groan” (Rom. 8:22–23), he is speaking collectively, and the way he says it implies a certain distance.

We do note, however, that further on in the letter he does speak in his own name and there utters a lofty exclamation, to which we will presently return: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom. 11:33). But in order to understand a text like this, it is wise to begin by observing its context, its literary coherence. In other words, we will succeed only by first observing the letter's arrangement and its structure.

Romans clearly falls into two main divisions: a theoretical one and a practical one. The didactic part, covered in chapters 1–11, is devoted to teaching, and the moralistic part, covered in chapters 12–15, is devoted to admonition. The apostle's concrete advice, which comes in the second half, follows naturally from his grand vision, depicted in the first half. After the teaching statements, formulated with verbs in the indicative mood, come the admonitions, formulated with verbs in the imperative mood. It is as if the apostle says, “Become what you are!”

The teaching half itself falls into two parts. First comes an unusually well-designed section, chapters 1–8, constituting the most cohesively constructed stretch of text in all the Pauline letters. There, if anywhere, Paul shows that he knows how to round off a segment with a striking final comment. In fact, a total of six times he concludes successive stages of his discussion by mentioning the role played by the man he emphatically calls, “Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Rom. 4:24; 5:11, 21; 6:23; 7:25; 8:39). He refers to him in an especially

1 This article is an extract from Jean Paillard's book, *In Praise of the Inexpressible: Paul's Experience of the Divine Mystery* (translated by Richard J. Erickson, Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

energetic way at the end of the very last paragraph (8:38–39). What does this paragraph look like?

A Double Change of Register

Romans 8:28–39 and 11:33–36

To this point, Paul has shown himself to be a practiced dialectician. From the beginning of the epistle he has given proof of a formidable skill in logic, even if he sometimes becomes tedious about it. The letter swarms with strict argumentation, marked by a mass of logical signals such as “for,” “therefore,” and “since.” But toward the end of this first major section he changes his style. Up to this point he has reasoned out his case, if not exactly coolly, then at least in a controlled, almost impersonal way. Now, though, he begins to wax lyrical, writing with heartfelt fervency. This gradual change in style is characterized first of all by rhythmic repetitions: The people whom God “foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . . And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29–30).

The change is further marked by a series of rhetorical questions: “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? . . . Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? . . . Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (8:31–35). Lastly, as an answer to these defiant questions, comes a series of “neither/nor” statements, which by their dense concentration convey the impression of a joyful assurance of victory:

[I]n all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced 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 God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:37–39)

At the end of the letter’s first main doctrinal section (chaps. 1–8), the emotional intensity gradually rises to a climax.

By the time he gets to this point, Paul has said all he has to say regarding his main topic, God’s universal salvation. Yet he takes it up again in a kind of appendix, as an explanation of an illustration of the subject applied to the special case of Israel’s final destiny (chaps. 9–11). This section, too, like the preceding one, ends in something distinct from the rest in terms of style. Here as well, in the teaching portion’s second climax, Paul slides into a vibrato. Following a final statement summarizing everything he has said so far (“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all”

[Rom. 11:32]), there now comes a lyrical conclusion, which in its entirety runs like this:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

This is how the didactic half of Paul's letter ends, and it is now these very verses that demand our attention.

A Radical Capitulation

In the letter's main part we mount up twice to a kind of culmination. In order to focus on the peculiar nature of the second of these, it can be useful to compare it with the earlier one and take note of a number of dissimilarities between them. In the first place, this second text is shorter than the first one, almost like silence in comparison. In the second place, the change in register, or style, while taking place somewhat gradually in chapter 8, occurs rather suddenly in chapter 11. Paul has argued purposefully in this latter section, presenting his thesis more or less objectively, and we encounter here an abrupt shift in style and intent.

Third, the rhetorical questions we find in both texts are of different kinds. To those in chapter 8, which have largely to do with whether anything can ever separate us from the love of Christ, Paul answers with a firm "Nothing!" (Rom. 8:37). These questions are aimed at clarifying a long discussion regarding God's unexpected love for humanity, manifested in Christ. They illustrate what Paul was thoroughly convinced of, namely that God is for us (Rom. 8:31). But the rhetorical questions he raises in chapter 11—"Who has known the mind of the Lord?"—have an opposite purpose: they demonstrate the letter writer's total inability to answer them. In chapter 8, he says that he is "certain" that nothing can resist God's achievement of salvation (8:38). His "neither/nor" statements make this very clear. But in chapter 11, he affirms his own ignorance, and in fact everyone's, too. No one is in a position to understand what has motivated the divine deliverance. It is precisely our ability to conceptualize that is called into question here—denied, in fact. It is a matter of a radical capitulation.

To this point, he has been teaching. He has kept his subject under control, like the learned and skillful instructor he is. But now, for a moment,

he comes down from his lectern, virtually falling out of it, in fact! He lets go of his scholarly control and falls speechless, though not literally speechless; he does continue writing after all, even eloquently. But he continues writing only in order to claim that speech now fails him. He finds he has nothing worthy to say about this reality that overwhelms him.

A Euphoric Capitulation

In some situations, being confronted with something we cannot possibly understand leaves us paralyzed. Failure of this sort can bring about weary sadness or dispirited resignation. If the game is lost before we even begin to play, what good is there in making any effort to understand it?

Here, however, we have nothing of the kind. Paul's capitulation at this point is utterly different from any kind of depression. On the contrary, this entire final paragraph is filled with wonder and admiration. It breathes with delight and surprise. Paul is dumbstruck with trembling humility in the face of something that not only surpasses his comprehension, but something that simultaneously fascinates him with its immeasurable depth and richness. His pounding heart takes over where his brain is overmatched. We can rightfully speak of a euphoric capitulation. The very style of his writing betrays his joyful frame of mind. He virtually gives us a song, a piece of poetry. It begins with two ecstatic cries (Rom. 11:33) and continues with three rhetorical questions expressing amazed rejoicing (vv. 34–35).

This "song" ends by answering Paul's third question: "Who has given a gift to [God], to receive a gift in return?" The answer is implied: No one! The reason: "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36a). This formula is almost liturgical. But the final verse is definitely so: "to him be the glory forever. Amen!" (v. 36b). The song is a song of praise. Just as poetry is more expressive than prose and singing more than recitation, an offer of praise to God says more than any theological speculation can ever do, no matter how profound. We can always praise what we cannot understand. A song of praise is both a recognition of inability and an expression of reverence for what cannot be comprehended, but can be only felt.

Paul's final paragraph in its entirety is thus a hymn to divine wisdom, a piece of music hinting at what cannot be articulated in abstract concepts. And that is as it should be. It is how everything should end. Any theology that does not result in singing God's praise is simply bad theology.

Beyond Words by Means of Words

An Unveiled Secret

Romans 16:25–27

In spite of his talkative nature, Paul has a keen instinct for the inexpressible. He stands in speechless amazement before the depth and richness of divine wisdom. In order to refer to this reality, one that defies our ability to grasp it, he uses the Greek word, *mystērion*, from which we get our word “mystery.” In fact, he uses this term more often than any other New Testament writer does. What do we understand him to mean by it?

In common use, the term leads us to think of something incomprehensible. In the same way, the adjective “mystical” makes us think of something strange, shrouded in the mist. This sort of meaning is not all that foreign to Paul. When he criticizes the Corinthians’ childish fascination with sensational manifestations of the Spirit, including ecstatically speaking in tongues, he writes: “For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in [a spiritual rapture]” (1 Cor. 14:2). And a few verses later he says to anyone who speaks like this: “the outsider [the uninitiated] does not know what you are saying” (v. 16).

Many people associate the notion of “mystery” with the unintelligible, with what is dark and puzzling. Even in our day of unimaginative rationalism, they are drawn *a contrario* to the mysterious: the Bermuda Triangle, UFOs, the secrets of the pyramids, the lost treasure of the Knights Templar, and other historical enigmas. Unexplained phenomena tickle their need for excitement.

Likewise, not a few pious Christians are especially intrigued with the darker passages in the Bible. In fact, they value the Bible precisely because it is dark. The more impenetrable a text, the better. This is why they love to read the prophet Daniel and to brood over what he must have meant by the king who comes to afflict the faithful “for a time, two times, and half a time” (Dan. 7:25). This formula is echoed in John’s Apocalypse (12:14), alongside other chronological indicators, such as “forty-two months” (11:2) and “one thousand two hundred sixty days” (11:3; 12:6). Obscure passages like these capture the attention of romantic believers and sometimes inspire them to devote themselves to wild speculations about the date of the end time.

Thus a number of believers and nonbelievers have in common this attraction to the occult, as if another world existed behind reality. Few modern authors have mocked this false sense of the mysterious with such mischievous delight as Umberto Eco does in his novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*. How does Paul view the subject?

A Secret Kept Hidden and Then Unveiled

Among the letters rightly or wrongly attributed to Paul, the one addressed to the Ephesian church is the richest of all in its treatment of mystery, especially in Ephesians 3:1–13. But the word *mystērion* itself occurs most often in 1 Corinthians. There Paul says he proclaims “the mystery of God” (1 Cor. 2:1) and “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden” (v. 7), that is, *both* secret *and* hidden. He does not expressly say that it was later revealed. But he must surely take that for granted, since he insists that he now proclaims it. While he does not specify here the time of this presumed unveiling, he does make it plain and clear in a later letter:

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery [*mystērion*] that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom. 16:25–27)

This solemn eulogy, rounding out the present state of the letter to the Romans, is rather overloaded. Nevertheless, its basic idea is clear. Two periods in the history of humanity are contrasted here. On the one hand Paul speaks of “long ages” gone by; on the other hand he speaks of the new “now.” What marked the transition from one period to the other is that a secret, long kept hidden, has now been disclosed.

A similar division in time appears in two later letters, which (all things considered) are not written by Paul himself, though they probably come from his staff, or from a “Pauline school.” What does the author of Colossians say about the word of God? He calls it “the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints” (Col. 1:26). The writer of Ephesians builds partly on the Letter to the Colossians. So it is not unexpected that when speaking of “the mystery hidden for ages in God” (Eph. 3:9), he in turn writes, “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed . . .” (v. 5).

To judge from the contrast that occurs in each and every one of these three texts, the word *mystērion* has a distinct meaning in them. It refers to something that was first kept secret and then later was revealed, and revealed at a particular point in time. The question is, when? Can this event be dated?

“... *The Fullness of Time*”

Ephesians 1:10

Our three epistles were written between 57 CE and somewhere in the 60s. The references to “now” in them must signify something having taken place at an earlier time. But can we be more precise about it?

Let us go back to the oldest of them: the letter to the Romans. There, Paul states several times that something important has recently occurred. After a rather dark portrayal of humanity’s failure to measure up to God’s standards, even from the beginning of time (Rom. 1:18–3:20), he mentions emphatically a literally epoch-making event that stunningly contrasts with the foregoing situation. “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed” (Rom. 3:21). Shortly thereafter he adds that God put Christ forward “as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness because, in his divine forbearance, he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous” (vv. 25–26). Already, here in chapter 3, two epochs stand in opposition: after a “previously” and a “time of forbearance,” we hear of the “present time,” when God mercifully intervened in Christ.

Christ’s achievement is mentioned again in chapter 5 in order to mark a decisive change in human history: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ dies for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). This must certainly mean the messianic time, the one mentioned by John the Baptist (Mark 1:15: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near”) and ushered in by Jesus. Somewhat later, the author of the letter to the Hebrews will write: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Heb. 1:1–2). Thus the antithetical pair “earlier/now” appears frequently in the New Testament in order to set the time before Christ and the time after Christ in opposition. What we want to know is what was revealed at the beginning of our era. But first we should ask who it is who reveals this secret.

In three of the letters cited above, the verbs “disclose,” “reveal,” and “make known” appear in the passive voice (Rom. 16:25–26; Col. 1:26; and Eph. 3:3, 5). Here, we recognize once again what scholars call a divine passive, common among Jews as a way to speak of God without using his name. Thus, when Paul writes about “the mystery that was kept secret for long ages” (Rom. 16:25), he apparently means that God has kept it secret. When he continues, “but [it] is now disclosed” (v. 26a), he means, similarly, that God has disclosed it.

In addition, when he immediately adds that the secret “is made known . . . according to the command of the eternal God” (Rom. 16:26b), Paul clearly asserts that God, and no other, first freely kept the secret to himself and only later, again of his own free will, let it be made known. This raises the question: Who is granted the privilege of this initiation into the secrets of God?

“ . . . To His Holy Apostles and Prophets ”

Ephesians 3:5

At the end of Romans, Paul appears to reckon with two stages in this initiation, and with two successive addressees: the secret is first “disclosed” (Rom. 16:25) and then “made known” to all nations (v. 26). Who received that first disclosure, before the secret was made more widely available to a broader circle of receptors?

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of both himself (1 Cor. 2:1, 4) and the apostles as mediators of God’s mysterious wisdom (beginning at v. 6 he shifts from “I” to “we”). Likewise, the author of Ephesians regards himself as belonging to the initiated: “the mystery was made known to me by revelation” (Eph. 3:3). Regardless of whether Paul himself is the writer here, or whether he communicated through a co-worker, the words evoke the story of the call of the apostle to the gentiles as he was on his way to Damascus. There, precisely through a revelation, he was sent out to all peoples, as both Galatians (1:15–16) and Acts (26:16–17) agree in testifying. In the same letter to Ephesus, in the very same passage in fact, we hear that the secret, long kept under wraps, “has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:5).

But who exactly is meant here by “apostles and prophets”? Presumably they are identical. If that is the case, then the apostles are viewed as prophets because something has been disclosed to them “by revelation” (3:3) “by the Spirit” (v. 5). Already in 1 Corinthians, Paul himself claims that God has revealed his secret “through the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:10). In the same way as with the Old Testament prophets, then, the Christian apostles have been blessed with prophetic gifts of the sort mentioned later in the same letter, where they are portrayed as enabling a person “to understand all mysteries” (13:2).

“ . . . To His Saints ”

Colossians 1:26

The divine mystery is not disclosed to a small number of people only, as if to an elite group. The intention is that it will be spread abroad, that it will be “proclaimed.” This latter verb occurs no fewer than five times in the section where Paul tells the Corinthians about the mystery (1 Cor. 2:1, 4, 6, 7,

9). Later in his second letter to Corinth, he writes: "But thanks be to God, who . . . through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing [Christ]" (2 Cor. 2:14). "In every place," he says. At the end of the letter to the Romans, he says that the secret has been made known "to all the Gentiles . . . to bring about the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:26).

Also in Colossians, God's revelation and its widespread proclamation are associated with each other. First the writer speaks of "the Gospel . . . which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Col. 1:23). Then he says that this Gospel's content is a secret about Christ, which has been revealed "to [God's] saints" (that is, to all the believers, v. 26) and which especially concerns the "Gentiles" (v. 27). Finally he says: "It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (v. 28). The adjective "all/every" is repeated three times here. These same people, far beyond the borders of Judaism, are the subject likewise in Ephesians, where the author claims he has received grace "to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" (Eph. 3:8–9).

The various designations for those who receive the proclamation—"all," "all nations," "all creatures," "all people," even "the gentiles"—speaks very clearly. There is nothing esoteric about the Christian message. It is not to be kept back by a small circle of initiates. Such elitism is completely foreign to Paul and his school.

" . . . Through the Prophetic Writings"

Romans 16:26

How was it possible for the apostles to interpret this message in such a way that their hearers or readers could understand it? For one thing, they were able to place in historical perspective what had happened "in their own day" (Rom. 3:26). What had only recently happened was, of course, something new, but it had been prepared for and hinted at from much earlier times.

Paul loves to cite the Old Testament, not least when he addresses Jewish Christians. He is careful to point out the continuity in God's saving achievement. The first time he takes up the matter of the divine mystery, he borrows words from the prophet Isaiah (1 Cor. 2:9; Isa. 64:4). Later, at the opening of Romans, he speaks of the Gospel, "which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures" (Rom. 1:2). This event that has recently come to pass is thus the fulfillment of ancient promises. Further on in Romans, Paul affirms that "the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God" (3:2), implying that God had spoken earlier. And in verse 21, Paul again insists that "the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets."

It is not easy to determine what Old Testament texts he has in mind here. But one thing we can say: the word *mystērion* itself is a keyword for the prophet Daniel. There, among other things, we hear that the Lord gives the wise their wisdom and reveals to them the deep and hidden things (Dan. 2:21–23, 28–30, 47). Paul apparently got his vocabulary from this source. With support from exactly such texts as these, he can make his Gospel clear, as he says in Romans when he speaks of a mystery “now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings . . . made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God” (Rom. 16:26). The assumption here is that the New Testament brings to the light of day what the Old Testament had already borne witness to and promised, even if only in an obscure way.

The Content of the Secret Disclosed

So what is it, then, that has been kept secret for so long? What has God finally unveiled? What is it that the apostles proclaim “with the help of the prophetic writings”?

In one letter after another we hear of “God’s purpose” (Rom. 8:28), of his free election (9:11), or of his “will,” in the sense of his purposes for humanity (Col. 1:9). Nowhere, however, is his free election so intimately connected with the divine mystery as in the Letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 1 the author speaks of “the good pleasure of his will” (Eph. 1:5), and of “his counsel and will” (v. 11). He does so precisely in connection with what has recently been revealed: “[God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ” (v. 9). But the connection is made most closely in chapter 3. In the same breath as he mentions “God’s purpose” (the NRSV puts it as “the commission”), the writer speaks of the grace he has received “to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God” (v. 9). And just two verses later we hear of God’s “eternal purpose” for the world (v. 11).

And what is this purpose? It is mentioned in the same paragraph where, speaking of “the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4), the author writes: “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers [with us Jews] in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (v. 6). Additionally, the Ephesian Christians read that they who were previously heathens have heard the message of “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (v. 8). And as we have seen, the entire doctrinal section of Romans focuses on this universality of salvation.

What stands at the center of the divine secret is thus God’s plan; it is actually a plan for salvation, and one that concerns all human beings without exception. Even those who once stood beyond the pale, from a Jewish perspective at any rate, now have access to God’s gifts. This is as plain as day. It

does not require any special sharp-wittedness to understand that God's act of rescue is offered to all humanity, absolutely all, without regard to race, gender, or social status. This much is crystal clear.

At least this was the case for the first gentile Christians: crystal clear and exhilarating all at once. No one could have predicted that gentiles would ever have had a part in the privileges of Jewish Christendom. We ourselves may read this without blinking and with relative indifference. The reason for this is that we who are *goyim*—that is, non-Jews—forget that we are the descendants of those gentiles. The reason may also be that we have simply read this text far too often. Any form of familiarity can become fatal. Blind as we are from being accustomed to what we know all too well, we easily undervalue it. In this way, what is well known becomes what is badly known.

This can be the case with the Greek word that sums up the revealed secret: *euangelion*. As is widely recognized, this term means “glad tidings” or “good news.” But this news, repeated in season and out for nearly two thousand years, has ceased to be news. It has long since become flat and stale. It has lost its novelty and thus its disturbing effect. How can we reinfuse it with its original power to provoke? It can be done only by distancing ourselves from it, or (more simply) by removing from us what has been so close to us that it makes us nearsighted. To do this requires swimming against the current, back to the source, back to the frame of mind characterizing those who heard the news the first time. It means going back to the ancient gentiles, since in one respect, they were the privileged receivers of God's universal deliverance.

At one point in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reports how Paul and Barnabas spoke with great success in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch:

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” [Isa 49:6] When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. (Acts 13:45–48)

The universal applicability of the Gospel was by no means understood from the beginning; it explains the outsiders' joy in this passage.

Two chapters later, Luke takes up the Jerusalem Council, at which the apostles debated the conditions necessary for a non-Jew to be admitted to the New Israel. At the end of the meeting, they determined not to lay upon the gentile believers any unnecessary Mosaic commandments. They sent an official letter to the inhabitants of Syrian Antioch confirming this decision. Luke reports that when the Christians at Antioch read the letter, “they rejoiced at the exhortation” (Acts 15:31). For them, this was truly good news, something to be surprised at and to celebrate. We could wish that later generations would likewise experience the same shock of surprise at this communication. No spiritual life can be kept alive without a continually renewed sense of wonder. Wonder in fact is the beginning of wisdom. It is also its continuation and its fulfillment, if we do not wish to die prematurely.

Revealed in Plain Speech

In spite of any difficulty we later Christians may have in actually appreciating the revolutionary side of the long-hidden secret, it still concerns all human beings. It is therefore unveiled for all to see. Not only that, but it is revealed in plain language as well, intelligible to everyone, educated or not. We recognize this in part through the verbs used in various letters to refer to the spreading of this information: instruct, enlighten, make aware, make known, speak of, reveal, give knowledge of, and so on. All of them point to effective communication.

We also see it in the way the letter writers identify the formal subject of this communication. In the earliest text about the secret, Paul says more than once that it stands at the core of his apostolic speech and proclamation (1 Cor. 2:1–10). In Romans he says the same thing (Rom. 16:25). The author of Colossians, for his part, professes to proclaim the Gospel, whose servant he has become (Col. 1:23). He shortly adds that he announces the recently revealed secret (vv. 26–28), and later again, that he “declare[s] the mystery of Christ” (4:3). This secret is thus synonymous with the Gospel he preaches. In his turn, the author of Ephesians identifies the content of the secret (Eph. 3:3–4, 9) with the Gospel itself (vv. 6–7). Thus later on he can speak of “the mystery of the gospel” (6:19), that is, the secret revealed by the Gospel.

To sum up, the two concepts of secret and Gospel stand very near to one another. In fact, we can say they include each other; they are identical with each other in terms of their content. What is true of the one, that it is open, clear, and intelligible, is true also of the other. The Gospel that from pedagogical motives was at first whispered in the ears of intimate disciples, would later be shouted from the rooftops, to be heard throughout the entire town (Matt. 10:27).

Now, after this lengthy analysis, we are in a better position to grasp the primary characteristic of the Christian sense of mystery. It is not what the average person may imagine it to be. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, people confuse this mystery with strange and cryptic things, with all sorts of odd phenomena. Many people act as if tangible reality actually concealed another reality behind it, the true reality, the only one worth paying attention to. In their eyes, it is as if below the surface of things there lay a subterranean net of meaning. They reduce our concrete world to a curtain on a stage and spend all their energy trying to sneak a look behind it.

Among these people is a host of writers and authors, above all perhaps those who belong to the romantic tradition, a tradition that at times has stood very close to occultism. Sensing the deeper dimensions of existence, these artists sought to reach its very limits. They loved vague boundaries. But true reality, in all its richness, is not to be found out there on the periphery. It is where it is: in the center, everywhere in fact. It is sufficient unto itself. A stone is a stone; a tree is a tree; a human being is a human being and nothing else. Of course, the *sfumato* of certain painters is imaginatively stimulating, and doubtless the hazy landscapes and blurred portraits by the impressionists have their charm. But true reality is not hidden in a metaphysical fog.

As Paul sees it, the world's true being does not lie hidden away in something like a secret desk drawer or in the false bottom of a suitcase. The mysterious nature of what he calls the mystery does not lie in its presumed unintelligibility. It is not something subtle, cabalistic, or cryptic, in need of deciphering. The secret is only inaccessible so long as it is not brought out into the light. As long as he wished it to be so, God's plan remained God's secret, a well-guarded secret that no one could have envisioned. No one could have foreseen it, for it depended on a divine decree, a free choice on God's part. God alone knew what his plan was for our deliverance, how in Christ he would welcome all humanity unto himself. He and only he was able to make that secret known, and only when he considered it appropriate to do so. But as soon as this unanticipated, unpredictable secret had been unveiled, it became accessible to everyone.

We know this from (among other things) what is said about those whom the Gospel addresses and about how they received the message. In the Letter to the Colossians, for example, we are told that the Colossian readers have "the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to [them]" (Col. 1:5–6a). They have "truly comprehended the grace of God" (v. 6b), which they have "learned from Epaphras" (v. 7), and they now know "how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery" (v. 27). More specifically, they have "received Christ Jesus the Lord, [and now must] continue to live [their] lives

in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as [they] were taught" (Col. 2:6–7). They have thus been duly instructed in what they need to know.

For a portion of humanity today, God remains silent. For Paul and his colleagues, he has spoken. He has left them a clear statement of his mind.

A Mystery Concealed Forever

Like many people do, feeling the need for a mental break, you open a detective novel and begin to read. Maybe it is your weariness that makes you a little slow-witted and unobservant, but for some reason you find yourself led down one false trail after another. Time after time, you have to say to yourself, "No, the person I suspected can't be the murderer after all." If the author has done a good job, the unresolved tension increases the further you read, until at last you reach the solution, which brings with it a genuine sense of satisfaction. But the moment of contentment is short-lived. As soon as the puzzle is solved, your interest in it evaporates. The novel suddenly loses its value for you. Who would ever want to read it a second time?

This imaginary scene raises a general question: Must every unveiling of a secret lead to a corresponding letdown? Can we possibly imagine an unveiling that calls forth continuous joy instead, as well as continued searching? It seems to have been exactly this way within the Pauline School. The idea that a long-concealed secret has been revealed implies no sense of disappointment. Quite the contrary—It drives Paul, who has just revealed the secret of Israel's final destiny (Rom. 11:25), to utter a burst of praise: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (v. 36). It leads him again, at the end of the letter, to exclaim: "[Glory] to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 16:27). The writer to the Ephesians likewise uses a doxology to round out his discourse on the revealed secret: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20–21).

Here, then, we have an unveiling that leads to long-lasting joy. How does it happen that we find ourselves standing between two such contradictory results: on the one hand, disappointment, and on the other, excitement? Could it perhaps be explained by the fact that the one case, a crime to be solved, represents a human situation, while the other is a divine mystery? Put more precisely, can it rest on the fact that a human mystery is finite and the divine mystery is infinite?

In the Presence of Measureless Realities

In the Pauline corpus, every time we hear about the divine mystery, we are said in fact to be standing in the presence of measureless realities. Two words frequently occur in this context, words otherwise semantically related to each other: “deep” and “riches.” Let us take a closer look at this subject.

The first time Paul uses the Greek term *mystērion*, referring to his proclamation of “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden” (1 Cor. 2:7), he says in the same breath that he proclaims “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived” (v. 9). From the beginning, therefore, he has in mind something that defies our powers of conception. In the next verse he mentions “the depths of God,” which the Spirit alone is able to search out (v. 10). Later again, in the Letter to the Romans, he presents the divine wisdom as fathomless: “O the depth of the riches . . . of God!” (Rom. 11:33). Here, once more, Paul speaks of a depth that cannot be plumbed. There is no point in trying to measure that which knows no measure.

The other term, “riches,” occurs especially often in the Prison Epistles. By disclosing this mystery, God has permitted the believers to know “how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery” (Col. 1:27). That is, they are given a glimpse of the overflowing abundance of God’s glory that has been made available to the gentile world. This is echoed in the Letter to the Ephesians, where the author claims to have received grace to “bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). In fact, the noun “riches” and the adjective “rich” occur more often in this letter than in any other. We hear of the rich grace through which God has “lavished on us” his wisdom and insight (Eph. 1:6–8). His inheritance is “rich” (v. 18); his power is of “immeasurable greatness” (v. 19). He is, moreover, “rich in mercy” (2:4), his grace rich beyond measure (v. 7), and his glory full of riches (3:16). Together, all these texts open up before us a perspective of dizzying proportions.

From Ignorance to Ignorance

So there is a great difference between the mystery resolved at the end of a detective novel and the mystery presented in these letters. This is true in spite of a certain common denominator, namely, that each, in its way, leads us from ignorance to understanding. What a detective story reveals is merely the identity of the murderer. A simple name, his or hers, is all it takes to satisfy us. The answer is thus clear-cut, though a bit meager perhaps; or, if you like, it is flat and two-dimensional. Once it is out, the entire reality is unveiled.

At first glance, the unveiling of a divine mystery seems to be equally clear-cut. This mystery is unveiled indeed; it is revealed, or made known, as various texts put it. The revelation is formulated in ordinary, plain, and com-

monly used terms. It can be summed up with brevity, as in Ephesians 3:3. We are thus properly informed about it. But this does not mean that the subject is exhaustively treated the moment the information is imparted to us. On the contrary, its content is full of ambiguities and puzzles, simply because of its depth and richness.

Louis-Marie Dewailly, according to his commentator Chantal Reynier, makes an interesting observation. The fact that something still remains hidden in this revealed mystery is, in part, reflected in the two different temporal indicators Paul uses at the end of Romans. When he says that a mystery "is now disclosed" and "made known" (Rom. 16:26), both verbs are in the aorist, a tense that points to something that happened at a particular point in time, once for all. But when he says that the mystery "was kept secret for long ages" (v. 25), he uses the perfect tense, which refers to a state of affairs remaining in effect. He is not dealing, then, with something belonging exclusively to the past. In one sense, the mystery remains hidden. God has not abandoned his silence. He has revealed himself, true enough, but he has not revealed himself completely.

Lars Hartmann, moreover, notes another text, this one from Colossians, in which we read that what has been said remains unsaid: "For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and . . . for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged . . . so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:1–3). Hidden! In other words, these treasures are, in Christ, hoarded away and inaccessible. Consequently, we must reckon with riches that remain hidden. On the one hand, the mystery is revealed. On the other hand, it remains hidden away, and the knowledge of it remains forever something to strive after. God has, in fact, made known his glorious riches in the mystery of Christ (1:27). Yet all the treasures of wisdom and understanding remain hidden in this same Christ.

But what exactly is it that has remained hidden for so long and now at last is spoken? It is what we have already seen: that God's salvation is offered to all humanity, without distinction, that his merciful compassion is universal. This is easily put into plain speech and easy to understand. What, then, is it that remains unspoken? What is it that will never be fully understood? It is what hides behind God's merciful decree (Rom. 11:32), the reason for it, its origin, its fundamental assumption, namely, the wisdom of God (v. 33a). It is this that remains forever "mysterious" (1 Cor. 2:7). It is this that characterizes him who is "the only wise God" (Rom. 16:27). It is precisely this mystery's inscrutability that makes Paul's rhetorical questions about it forever unan-

swerable (Rom. 11:33–35). We have finally arrived, then, at an irreducible remainder.

What name can we legitimately give to this mysterious remainder, which must for all time to come remain unknowable? The Greek term *mystērion* can be translated in two ways, depending on context. Where the issue has to do with something kept hidden, we can use the word “secret.” But once the hidden thing has been revealed, the term “secret” is no longer appropriate. An unveiled secret is a secret no longer. We need to find another term, one that corresponds to what remains inaccessible even after its unveiling. For this we should use the word “mystery.”

A mystery is always a mystery, impenetrable no matter how much we try to plumb its depths or how much we say or write about it. Its rich content offers a perpetual challenge to all such attempts. However much God may reveal of his secret, of his plan for deliverance, he remains silent about what lies behind this plan. Of course, he does lead us from ignorance to understanding, but at the same time he leads us also from ignorance to deeper ignorance. It cannot be otherwise, unless we want to make a liar of King Solomon, when, on the day he saw the temple filled with smoke, he said, “The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness” (1 Kings 8:12).

The Particular Nature of the Christian Sense of Mystery

We are now able, better than before, to appreciate the difference between a crime to be solved, or any problem of the sort, and, on the other hand, a mystery. A puzzle is something we solve once for all. A mystery is something we sound the depths of, something to immerse ourselves in over and over again. Against the background of the texts we have been discussing, we now have a better means for discerning the particular nature of Christian believers. They distinguish themselves alike from both skeptics and fanatics, and from those opposing attitudes to reality. The cool, indifferent skeptics cannot deal with any form of definitive knowledge. They are firmly locked up in their “maybe or maybe not” approach. Thus they know nothing at all. Fanatics, however, claim to know everything, and to know it better than anyone else does. In their intolerant fundamentalism, they do not perceive reality’s complexity. They are, and remain, imprisoned in the snares of black-and-white thinking. People like this frighten away a host of honest truth-seekers, who stand at a distance for fear of finding themselves pigeonholed.

In contrast to skeptics, believers know they have been led from ignorance to understanding. The divine secret has indeed been revealed to them. But they also realize they have been brought, at the same time, from ignorance to further ignorance. God’s mystery remains forever impenetrable, even for

them. Of course they realize that God is wise, but they acknowledge that they do not know what this means, or how wise he is, or to what degree. This is exactly what was meant by Thomas Aquinas, a theologian who in no way could be accused of defeatism in the pursuit of knowledge. Aquinas wrote, somewhat provocatively: "Neither the Catholic nor the pagan understands God's being as it truly is."

Penetrating the Cloud of Unknowing

If the riches found in Christ are "boundless" (Eph. 3:8), it is worth asking whether there is any point at all in trying to plumb their depths. What is inscrutable is, doubtless, inscrutable for all time.

Yet we do not need to feel paralyzed by this. We may feel stimulated by it instead; it can waken our curiosity, in spite of its inscrutability. Even if we know that we shall never exhaust the richness of the divine mystery, we wonder whether it might still be possible to grasp at least something of it. And even a limited understanding of this "something" can be considered of more value than any full-orbed knowledge of a host of less important things. The members of the Pauline circle must have had some consciousness of this, since understanding occupies such an important place in such letters as Colossians and Ephesians. Not only that, but they also present this highly desirable knowledge, *gnōsis*, as something that develops, something that can grow. Its first, elementary stage entices us to push all the more deeply into the divine mystery. It is precisely progress in this knowledge that both letters recommend.

A Gradual Penetration of the Mystery

What does the author of Colossians say about this? To begin, he reminds his readers of their past: "You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel . . . from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God" (Col. 1:5–6). But this foundational knowledge, resulting from the first missionary proclamation, is not enough. More is needed: "We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work" (vv. 9–10). Here the author desires among his readers an increase in ethical discernment, in the knowledge of God's will. It is the same a bit farther on, when he writes, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (Col. 3:9–10).

In the same way, the writer of Ephesians urges his readers “to be renewed in the spirit of [their] minds, and to [clothe themselves] with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:23–24). In certain texts, then, we hear of a process of moral maturation, of an ever better informed practical discernment that leads to an increasingly holy way of life.

In still other texts we hear of a purely intellectual maturity, or we might say a life of increased contemplation. The author of Colossians writes, “I became [the Church’s] servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known” (Col. 1:25). And he adds, “For I want [all of you to] . . . have all the riches of assured understanding and [to] have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself” (Col. 2: 1–2). We meet the same wish for a gradual, contemplative penetration of God’s being in the parallel letter: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him” (Eph. 1: 17). Further along, we read again of the desire for a clearer understanding of God’s mystery (3: 16–19).

Over and over, then, it is expected that the readers will be filled “with all spiritual wisdom and insight,” that they will be “renewed in true knowledge,” that they will be “renewed in spiritual understanding,” and so on. If these readers had been tempted at times to think they were full-grown and fully taught, such repeated prayers and desires should certainly have contributed to renewing their openness to further development. They are thus faced with a kind of continual disruption of their assumptions. How does this gradual penetration of the mystery take place, understood in concrete terms? We may begin to answer this question by thinking through the various roles that words generally play for the writer and his readers.

Last and First

Literary artists strive to express what they perceive, feel, and think. With determined persistence, they pursue adequate and living ways of putting into words what they bear within them. After something like an exhausting pregnancy, they give birth at last to a publishable product born of an extended creative process. With writers, then, the words come last.

For Christians it is the reverse; the words come first. We come to faith through hearing (Rom. 10:14–17), or through reading. In one sense, Christianity is a religion of Scripture, in the same way as Judaism and Islam are each founded upon a book. The faithful take as their point of departure an authoritative text that they regard as inspired. They consider themselves completely dependent on a revelation viewed as originating from the outside.

From the beginning, then, Bible readers have understood what they have been instructed to believe in and to live by. This fact alone should be enough to initiate them into the deeper mystery, but things are not quite so simple.

In spite of all their diligent efforts, secular writers must eventually acknowledge that they never really find the right words in which to clothe their experiences. When they consider the gaping distance between the books they dreamed of writing and the actual results of their labors, they can hardly regard their literary works as anything but a series of failures. Even though they make repeated improvements in order to reduce the distance between what they envisioned and what they have actually produced, the finished product never measures up to the dream. Awareness of this is a constant source of agony for a writer. If anyone can be said to know how difficult it is to write, writers can!

However, those who have been awakened to faith know how difficult it is to read, to really read a text—that is, to bring forth from it what is actually there. But even believers are aware of a certain distance, in this case the distance between the written words before their eyes and what those words are meant to convey. The distance between sign and signified is in fact a large one, both for the author and for the readers. This is true, even though the movement from the one to the other goes in opposite directions: authors move from a previous experience to a written account drawn up afterward; readers, in contrast, move from an existing text to a subsequent experience. If it takes time for a writer to master his own language or to find his own style, it takes an equally long time and just as much patience for a pious reader to really apply herself to a biblical text. (The fact that this seemingly straightforward, easy task of reading is actually difficult and tedious finds living proof in all the contemplative monks and nuns. If it were not so difficult, why would they occupy their entire lives with it?)

Reading a text rightly is thus no easy process, because, for one thing, words are merely words, empty shells, air. They are nothing but conventional, abstract signs, even those used for referring to concrete realities. Words are disembodied, transparent, and hollow. We cannot take a seat on the word “chair,” warm ourselves at the word “bonfire,” or find shelter from the rain under the word “roof.” No one can commit a murder by using the word “murder,” except perhaps in the writing of a detective novel. And what does the word “smell” smell like? Or how do the words “sweet” and “bitter” taste? Between all these words and their corresponding realities yawns an abyss we cannot easily cross over. Only reality itself is real. Reality alone is worthy of our attention, even if it is difficult to attain it from the words representing it. So what are we to do?

Preliminary Precision

A first step in addressing this situation can consist in defining the words used, by Paul for example, so that we can understand what he is talking about. The primary thing about a definition is that it teaches us the exact meaning of a word. But definitions also have a disadvantage. By offering us a sharply contoured framework, a definition can lull us into confidence that we have exhausted a word's richness. But this is misleading, especially when we are dealing with divine realities. As we can see from the Latin root of the word "definition"—*finis/limit*—a "de-fini-tion" puts delimitations on something, delimiting it from something else. And if it delimits, it also confines. But the mystery of God is limitless. It cannot be fenced in by any kind of boundary marker. As Gregory of Nyssa put it, "the only limit God knows is the absence of any limit." Thus a definition can be misleading.

Under no circumstances can a definition be completely satisfying, since it never tells the entire story. Precision is good. Precision is useful, even necessary, if we do not want to wander around in a fog. But precision is not everything. A word or a concept does not merely have a particular contour. It also has something we could call density, quality, and depth. Within the narrow borders of a definition, it is thus always possible to go deeper. If we do not do so, we are only half the way there. The text remains partly mute. So how can we get the text to speak?

Individual Responsibility

Getting the half-mute words to say something to us requires another step beyond framing a definition. What is that next step? The information we find in the New Testament is public, collective, addressed to all humanity. But any text, biblical or secular, attains its full value only when an individual reader receives it. It is incumbent upon every believer to take responsibility for his or her own relationship with the text. Of course, the objective message can certainly be heard in community with other believers, during liturgy, for example. But it cannot be appropriated except in solitude, in isolation. No one can do it for another person. The message can be taken in only through personal consciousness, through what was once called *lectio divina*. Only then is our wonder kept alive, and only then is the text still able to speak to our hearts. But how does this individual reception actually happen?

Without blaming anyone in particular, we can declare quite categorically that nowadays we in the so-called West live in an age of speed. Our cars, trains, boats, and planes travel at ever faster rates. Thanks to e-mail and other technical means, our messages reach the other side of the planet virtually instantaneously. We ourselves are always in a hurry. We close our letters "in all haste"!

This accelerated tempo can also be seen at the intellectual level. Courses are available in speed-reading, teaching people how to scan a text. This method is especially useful for skimming an administrative or economic report. The question is, however, whether it is equally useful when applied to texts of another kind, let us say poetical or meditative texts in which rhythm, pitch, or atmosphere says as much as the individual words do. If we want to read such texts profitably, we should perhaps try to read them as ancient readers did. They read with both eye and ear, and with the lips. That is, they read aloud, or at least half-aloud, even when they read to themselves. This is exactly what the Ethiopian queen's finance minister was doing, riding along in his chariot somewhere between Jerusalem and Gaza. And because he was reading aloud, Philip the deacon, making his way along the same road, was able to recognize the text from the prophet Isaiah that the man was reading (Acts 8:26–27).

Those of us who read silently and quickly, too quickly, would surely come out ahead by simply putting on the brakes. One way to do this perhaps is to read a text over again, many times, one after another. Or we might read aloud, even softly, as in a mantra, until we begin to taste the text on the tongue. Read and reread. Chew. Ruminant. But will even that be enough? Let us once more consider the difference between a poet and her reader. The function of the poet's words is to reflect her personal experience. The words a believer finds in holy Scripture, however, have a different role. Their function is to awaken in the believer a similar personal experience. They help the reader to experience something new. Yet, though it may be a new experience, it is based on something old. As we let the words sink into our consciousness and work there in silence, we can with good advantage recall to mind earlier privileged moments when certain biblical words and images opened themselves to us. In this way, these earlier experiences can be renewed and strengthened, and the distance between the words and the reality they represent can be reduced.

Their repeated urgings toward ever deeper and richer insight imply that Paul and his fellow workers recognized at least the possibility of reducing this distance between word and reality. We thus have permission to dream of a day when the inspired words we read will reveal to us all the more the substance of their meaning and thereby inspire us! The written text itself is a given. What remains is to discover the Spirit that dwells within them. After an objective analysis, the time comes for a warmly vivid realization. Then the words can become more what they are meant to be—that is, something more closely identical with the reality they represent, such that this reality becomes clear, tangible, almost sculptural, as in a literary masterpiece. Truly skillful writers can do magic with words, changing the word “water” into water and making the word “sun” give forth light and warmth. Good writers can write in such a way that the tree they are describing actually casts a shadow. Taught

by teachers such as these, we succeed in glimpsing reality hiding behind the biblical words we read. These then become living words, and through them, we also live.

But once more, we ask, how does this come to pass? Perhaps there is something we can learn from the experiments our forebears conducted in this regard.

Denial and Hyperaffirmation

According to long-standing tradition, two works, called *On the Divine Name* and *On the Mystical Theology*, were written by Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian philosopher whom Paul converted to Christianity (Acts 17:34). But the tradition lacks support. At the earliest, these works were composed during the sixth century. Nonetheless, they exercised a profound influence on later theology, both in the East and in the West. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas used them as a basis for his meditations on the possibility of speaking about God while simultaneously respecting his inexpressible nature. In his own works Thomas reckoned with three approaches to the divine mystery—three “ways,” as he called them: *via causalitatis*, *via negationis*, and *via eminentiae*. Simply put, he envisioned that, in answer to the question of whether “God is such and such,” we would first answer, “yes.” Then we would answer, “no,” and finally, “yes, of course, but only with qualification.”

Thus, even if we are merely fumbling for an acceptable understanding of God, we can begin with a positive affirmation. If we are convinced that everything derives from a Creator, we may take it for granted that the positive characteristics and abilities found in creation have their corresponding features in him. Consider what the psalmist thought about it: “He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?” (Ps. 94:9). The question of whether God has the ability to see, hear, or know can thus be answered with an unhesitating “yes.” Going backward in this way, from the creaturely effect to the divine cause (Latin: *causa*), and expecting to find there in the divine sphere the best of what we have here on earth is exactly what is meant by the *via causalitatis*. So far, so good.

But suppose we read a biblical text describing God’s exalted state, this one from Isaiah, for instance: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). If we take it seriously, we are gripped with doubt, with something like shame for having fallen victim to an illusion. We catch ourselves creating a god in our own image. We cry out in terror that God is something “other,” and that we did not know it! As soon as we realize our mistake, we hasten to take back what we just said in a moment of thoughtlessness. We promptly declare that, no, God cannot be viewed as being or doing anything whatever

in a human way. Every attempt to describe him must be rejected. He is neither this, nor that, nor that. This sort of denial, which comes close to mere silence, characterizes the *via negationis*, or *via negativa*, as it is also called.

But this *via negativa*, which has lately become a kind of theological “fad,” can hardly be the last word on the subject. At the end of the day, we may still wonder whether, in spite of everything, God does indeed possess the characteristics we attributed to him in the beginning. No human being who has sensed his immensity and become fascinated with it can long keep silent. The very attractiveness of God drives such a person to leave all denials behind and to risk resorting to other means of expressing it, such as hyperaffirmation. This involves our elevating words to their optimal level and beyond, if possible. We give them extra freight, as it were. We do this, for example, by adding such prefixes as *hyper* or *super*. Words with these prefixes point hyperbolically outside of themselves. They do not say all there is to say; it is impossible to do so in any case. Yet they function as incentives, signaling the direction in which we should turn our attention, upward, and beyond. In a desperate attempt to speak the unspeakable, we labor in this way to find language that surpasses even itself. We try to maximize it, to stretch it to the breaking point. Naturally, God is not this or that in the same way we might be. Still, perhaps he is so in the eminent degree. And for this reason the third approach is called *via eminentiae*. We therefore now make any necessary adjustments and nuance the radical conclusions we have arrived at so far in the foregoing stages.

The tripartite approach described above is actually indivisible. It is, moreover, so important that it will repay us to review it once more in order to be more precise about the nature of each of the three steps.

There is not a great deal to say about the first, apart from the fact that it corresponds to a spontaneous and innocent, even naïve, stage of the process. By itself it is certainly insufficient to the task, but it lays the groundwork, making the other two stages possible.

Moving on a step further, fully conscious that no one can come even near to understanding what God’s character is really like, we determinedly dismiss out of hand all conceivable suggestions. We eliminate a priori all positive qualifiers we could ever think of. None of them would suffice, not even the most sublime. In the face of such a chain of impossibilities, we can make only lists of what we reject. Believers who radically throw off every statement about God are living on the safe side. They run no risk of saying something stupid, something blasphemous, about him. Leaving things unsaid is doubtless the safest way of doing justice to what cannot be spoken. This *via negativa*, the way of unknowing, can be regarded as the stage of trial, or judgment.

Finally, we come to the last step, one that is risky enough, to be sure, but one that is justified nonetheless. Provided we guard ourselves against unduly simplified formulations, which would reveal fatal misconceptions, we can

make bold to draw comparisons with the incomparable. This third stage can be seen as a stage of synthesis, uniting two seemingly irreconcilable attitudes: yes and no.

Still, it clearly and markedly deviates from the second stage. The second is static, whereas the third is dynamic. The *via negativa* is in fact no “way” at all, in the sense of a way we can follow step-by-step, a way that leads us gradually toward our goal. For every solution is ruled out from the start. There is no hierarchy there, no gradation. The highest and foremost “names”—to use the language of Dionysius—are as useless as the least of them. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is acceptable. Halfway along we realize we are just as far from the goal as we were when we set out. We are only marching in place, merely treading water.

The *via eminentiae*, on the other hand, is a true “way.” We move along an ascending scale, where qualifications such as wisdom, generosity, and strength—applied to God—take on an ever increasing dignity. We progress from affirmation to affirmation, seamlessly, unendingly. The higher we go in this, the more we approach the divine reality, our anticipation and curiosity mounting all the while. In spite of these crescendos, we remain conscious of the fact that the similarity between the Creator and the creation is only relative, while the difference between them is radical. The way (*modus*) in which God is wise, generous, and so on remains completely impenetrable. And, thanks to this reservation—a streak of denial in the heart of our affirmation—his transcendence is honored.

Finally, we may note that the *via negativa* is ascetic in the extreme. It would be prohibitively puritanical, fatally pure, if it stood alone. How long can we live in a vacuum, after all? It needs to be complemented by the *via eminentiae*, which is cautiously generous and indulgent, provided we do not lose sight of God’s majesty in the process. This third “way” leaves greater space for wonder, for a far more joyful wonder. It presents God as eminently desirable.

Obviously, Paul had no opportunity to read either Dionysius the Areopagite or Thomas Aquinas. Moreover, their scholastic way of reasoning (shall we say) would have been foreign to him. Yet numerous expressions and turns of phrase can be found in his letters that reveal how spontaneously and purely intuitively he followed the same scheme as they did. That scheme surely reflects both the structure of our psyche and the nature of reality.

What would later come to be called the *via causalitatis* was not unknown to Paul. One indicator of this is what he wrote to the Romans: “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom. 1:20). Paul had already taken the phenomena of the visible world as a place from which to mount up to the knowledge of the Most High.

But it is equally clear that he takes into consideration the limits of our intellectual abilities. This is why he often uses so-called privative adjectives, which in English translation begin with prefixes *un-* or *in-* or end with the suffix *-less*. We have just seen the term “invisible,” for example; others he uses include “imperishable,” “incomprehensible,” and “boundless.” At the same time, he uses expressions that disregard those limitations. His epistles swarm with hyperbolic words, beginning with the Greek prefix *hyper-*, which came into English as “abound all the more” (Rom. 5:20; “superabound”) and “[glory] beyond measure” (2 Cor. 4: 17), to mention only two. Add to these his many references to thoughts of riches and overflowing.

Now, with a perspective renewed through the interpretive keys found in Dionysius and Thomas, it will presumably be easier to get some of the important words in the Pauline corpus to open themselves for us.

The Practice of Looking Backward

We read a text, or so we think, and we think we understand it. What we are seldom aware of, however, is that a text says more than we realize. By this I do not mean to say that a text necessarily includes hidden cryptic messages. Biblical texts are not usually made up of difficult words, of hermetic terms common in theological jargon. Ordinarily they are composed of typical words we can find in any dictionary. Yet those words can say more than what they seem to say at the first reading.

Any literary person will affirm that it is not easy to read a text, really read it straight from the page, and get it to divulge its full significance. Experts in this field distinguish between a basic reading skill and a well-differentiated one.

It is a relatively simple thing to learn to read. Children can do it. In this electronic age, even machines can do it. Significantly more difficult is acquiring the ability to discern a text’s deeper meaning, so that the printed words transform themselves into a living reality and the author’s rapture becomes the reader’s as well. It requires diligent practice. This kind of skill in reading is particularly called for in cases of texts that deal with God’s mystery. Everything we have learned about this mystery up to now amounts to virtually nothing, compared to what remains to be learned.

It sometimes happens that concrete circumstances lead Paul to look backward. When he wants to characterize for the Corinthians the role he and his coworkers fulfill in their congregation, he asks that they consider himself and the others as “stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1). When he describes his own personal role, he says that he came to them in order to announce the “mystery of God” (2:1). The best thing he has to offer them, then, is the mystery of God, which, as we have seen, is synonymous with God’s

universal plan of salvation (Rom. 16:25–7; see also Col. 1:25–27 and Eph. 1:9–13 and 3:1–11).

This plan was not self-evident. No one had anticipated it; it was completely unexpected by humanity, and long kept secret by God. When it was finally disclosed, it was viewed as shocking, not least of all by Jews. People wondered what could possibly lie behind it. What could have motivated God to intervene in such an astounding way?

To answer this very question, Paul sometimes looks backward and lays his finger on the plan's presupposition, or rather on its prehistory, even though that lies beyond the boundaries of time, deep in the eternal bosom of God. He then makes use of various words that all point to virtually the same thing. He speaks of God's "grace" (especially in Rom. 4 and 5), of his "kindness" (Rom. 11:22), and even of "his kindness and forbearance and patience" (Rom. 2:4), or of his generous "gifts" (Rom. 11:29; 1 Cor. 2:12). Most often he speaks of his "mercy"—a word that subsumes all these divine characteristics. The doctrinal portion of Romans deals precisely with this all-encompassing attribute (Rom. 3:21–11:36). When the apostle summarizes this idea one last time in Romans 11:32–33 ("For God has imprisoned all [human beings] in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all"), he bursts out in the well-known words, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" What actually strikes him with astonishment, then, is the wisdom and knowledge of God. In his search for the source of God's bewildering decision to save all humanity, Paul first looks back to God's mercy. But he does not stop there; he goes even further back, until he reaches the ultimate source, divine wisdom.

The significance that the mysterious side of God's nature has for Paul is obvious from the detailed way he discusses it the first time it comes up in his letters (1 Cor. 1:15–2:16). Likewise significant is the fact that it is mentioned in the three main Pauline texts treating the revealed mystery (1 Cor. 2:6–10; Rom. 16:25–27; and Eph. 3:8–12). Thus, we are dealing here with a core term in the proclamation of the Pauline School, a word to take note of, a word to remember, a word on which to spend some time. Unfortunately it is an abstract word, and anything abstract is easily seen as pale and unreal. How can we give it living substance? What would "God's wisdom" mean for us if it meant what it is intended to mean?

Wisdom in the Old Testament

We can easily show that Paul seldom cites the Old Testament as often and as densely as he does when he is discussing this divine characteristic. For this reason it seems natural first of all to take a brief look at how God's wisdom was viewed in ancient Israel. It was usual to use human wisdom as

a point of departure. But how was that viewed? Beginning with concrete and unpretentious, perhaps even lowly, everyday experience, we find texts where wisdom is equated with the professional skill of a craftsman (Exod. 31:1–5; Isa. 28:24–29), or where it is connected with the accomplishments of current technology (Job 28:1–14)—something worthy of high praise.

Moving to the top of the social ladder, we find sometimes a skilled governor, such as Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 41 and 47), sometimes an honored king in Israel, one who can attend to the law and justice (1 Kings 10:9; Sir. 10:1). Solomon was regarded as preeminent in this respect. The young man who had recently taken his place on the throne considered himself green and inexperienced (1 Kings 3:7). For this reason he prayed for “an understanding mind” (v. 9). Then God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you” (1 Kings 3:11–12). Here, once more, we are dealing primarily with a practical wisdom—again something worthy of appreciation.

At a more general level, this time from a moral perspective, we can view wisdom as the art of living, as the ability to direct one’s own life by readily paying attention to the experiences of one’s elders. A wise man is able to esteem things in line with their actual worth and then to act accordingly. Both the book of Proverbs and the Psalter preserve several ideal portraits of such people. All these texts are permeated with a clear admiration. Whether in connection with a craftsman, a king, or an individual person of faith, human wisdom is portrayed as something worth having, something actually given by God (Gen. 41:38–39)—something worth praying for.

But there are some people who overvalue their own perceived wisdom. Various spiritual leaders warn against such inflated self-opinions. Isaiah writes, “[Woe to] you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight!” (Isa. 5:21). And in Proverbs we read, “Do you see persons wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for fools than for them” (Prov. 26:12). There are many such texts in the Old Testament. Especially relevant in our context is the passage in Isaiah where the prophet has the Lord promising to strike people with astonishment. What then results from this unexpected intervention? “The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden” (Isa. 29:14). This very verse is the one Paul first quotes (rather freely, as he often does) when he takes on the arrogance of Corinthians and contrasts human wisdom with divine wisdom: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart” (1 Cor. 1:19).

The Foolishness of God

1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16

With good reason, the apostle referred to such texts no fewer than six times as he lectured the Corinthians. These Christians had been behaving like children, pretending to be “intellectual” and wrangling with each other over who had the best teacher, so that they could boast. Paul felt it necessary to put them in their place, and he does so energetically with a particularly eloquent polemic:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God . . . as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 1:26–31)

It must have been a salutary lesson for the Corinthians to see themselves equated with things that are not, with despised and weak things, with what the world considered foolish. Still, further on as he rounds out his argument with a practical conclusion, Paul shows no hesitation in once again seeking support from the older wisdom literature: “Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness,’ and again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile’” (1 Cor. 3:18–20). With these two new quotations, one from Job 5:13 and the other from Psalm 94:11, Paul warns his addressees to reassess their view of wisdom.

Paul is just as provocative when he writes about the content of the message:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the

wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:18–25)

Paul's audacity seems to know no bounds. It is not enough that in discussing the question of humankind he paradoxically insists that it is the despised and disdained who are chosen. But he does the same thing when he speaks of God: he declares God's weakness, obvious in the seemingly final defeat of Christ, as power, and God's foolishness as wisdom.

His use of these outrageous paradoxes must be explained on the basis of how he views human failure. Human beings had in their hands the possibility of learning to know God through ordinary human wisdom, that is, through looking at the created world. For the world was surrounded and permeated by the wisdom of God and bore witness to it (1 Cor. 1:21; see also Rom. 1:19–22). But they missed the opportunity. When this more obvious, ordinary way led humanity nowhere, God chose an unordinary way—one of madness in human eyes. He chose to redeem the world through a disgraceful execution on a cross—which Paul gladly mentions whenever he looks back (here in 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2, and in Gal. 1:3; 3:1). As he sees it, God's wisdom—that is, his ingenuity, his daring inventiveness—is so great that it overwhelms its antithesis. In the same way, an extremely bright light blinds the eye and is transformed into darkness. Too much is too much! But when wisdom is at its greatest, it cannot be described otherwise than by means of its opposite: a non-wisdom, an anti-wisdom, a foolishness.

If we want an even clearer idea of what Paul means by divine wisdom, we need to take another look at his summary statement: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). He is apparently making a comparison, since he uses the comparative forms "wiser" and "stronger." It could be tempting, therefore, in a thoughtless moment, to imagine that divine wisdom is a kind of improvement on human wisdom. But that would mean that we had transformed God into an idol. Such an illusion is foreign to Paul, for he does not say here that God is wiser than human beings. Rather, he writes that the wisdom of God is foolishness. With this defiant formulation, he excludes any conceivable comparison that would bring the two realities anywhere near each other.

His way of recasting the concept is therefore synonymous with decisive repudiation: No! God is indeed wise, but not as humans are. Thus Paul in his own way takes what Dionysius the Areopagite would later call the *via negativa*.

"O the Depth . . ."

Romans 11:33–36

In his first text on wisdom, motivated by the situation in Corinth, Paul had fun, as it were. He juggled with the concepts, replacing them with each other. But in his second text on the topic, the one found in Romans 11:33–36, Paul abandons the role of a juggler or an acrobat for that of a poet. Instead of provoking his readers with outrageous paradoxes, he speaks only very briefly. Yet the rich passage deserves to be read one more time:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

The style here is different from that of the earlier epistle, though Paul's basic outlook is the same. One sign of this similar outlook is the fact that, among the texts he cites, this one appears in both letters: "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:34; 1 Cor. 2:16). In both cases, Paul is standing in the presence of something that upsets all our calculations, though the actual reason for his confusion is different in each situation.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is amazed at God's perplexing inventiveness in redeeming the world through the ignominious catastrophe of the cross. Here, in Romans, however, he is amazed at another similarly perplexing detour, which he has just been discussing (chaps. 9–11). He stands astonished at God's use of another failure, namely, the Jewish refusal to recognize Jesus as Messiah, as a means to rescue the heathen. In both instances, he praises God's ingenuity. In both cases, the Portuguese proverb is proven true: God writes straight on crooked lines.

At this point, we may justifiably ask why Paul uses two words, "wisdom" and "knowledge," to describe the divine wisdom (Rom. 11:33). Is it because he wants to add emphasis by repetition, or strengthen his point with an apposition? Or is he actually referring to two separate realities?

Obviously the word "wisdom" carries a greater semantic weight than the word "knowledge" does. It is mentioned first and appears again, alone, at the end of the letter (Rom. 16:27). All things considered, we perhaps should not exaggerate the difference between them. It is minimal. Based on the word order in the two parallel parts of Romans 11:33, "wisdom" appears to refer

more immediately to God's "decree," that is, to his universal plan of salvation. The plan expresses his inconceivable generosity toward all human beings and forms the leading theme of the first main section of the epistle. As for the term "knowledge," it clearly refers more readily to God's "ways," that is, to his strategy, the means by which he accomplishes his purpose. In other words, he has used the temporary indifference of the Jews as a pretext for the conversion of the Gentiles—the main theme of the two previous chapters. In both cases he is dealing with something no one has ever even dreamed of.

Here we are faced with a further question: Why does Paul speak of "depth"? Why use this sort of metaphor? According to an Aristotelian axiom, there is nothing in the intellect that is not already found in the senses. This is doubtless true. Every time we think, we proceed from sensory perceptions. This is why we spontaneously use images, spatial images among others, even to describe emotional or spiritual realities. Some of these images are horizontal, as when we speak of close friends or distant relatives, or when we insist, "far be it from me to do this or that!" Other images are vertical, as when we talk of a low motive or of lofty thoughts. And when we say that we are immersed in meditation, we are referring to a kind of deep-sea diving expedition into the fathomless complexity of reality, what the French call *l'épaisseur des choses*.

This leads us to think of an abyss, a gulf. In this respect it is synonymous with "deep," even "precipitously deep." It is exactly the word in the verse we have before us: "O the depth of the riches!" The spiritual meaning of this outcry must certainly be Paul's amazement at how deep and rich God's wisdom is, or how deep it is because of his exceedingly great riches. God's ways are, in fact, "inscrutable." It will not help us to find an unusually long measuring line and play it out. All lines are too short, no matter how long they are! No matter how deep we let it go, it will never reach the bottom. Beneath every level lies another, and another, and still another, endlessly.

It is worth noting in this closing section of the didactic portion of Romans that Paul's admiration and wonder are actually called forth by impossibilities. The limits of our imaginative abilities are indicated by the rhetorical questions he asks: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" We have seen how he then finds inspiration from Old Testament texts, such as Jeremiah 23:18: "For who [of the prophets] has stood in the council of the LORD so as to see and to hear his word?" Paul could have appealed to several others, including the ironic question that Eliphaz puts to Job: "Have you listened in the council of God? And do you limit wisdom to yourself?" (Job 15:8).

Israel's wise often point out such shortcomings in the face of the mystery of wisdom. They do so probably because they see how easily we imagine that we understand it adequately. In order to dispel this illusion, we can follow with advantage the good advice of the Talmud: "If you want to understand

the invisible, pay close attention to the visible." It is a fact that, even on the concrete level, we at times deceive ourselves into overestimating the power of our imagination. The Lord is portrayed as saying to Abraham, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them" (Gen. 15:5). But, of course, Abraham could not; neither can we. We cannot even grasp the significance of the distance between the stars, a distance measured in light-years. What does it really mean to us when we read that a light-year equals five quadrillion, eight hundred and seventy-eight trillion miles, or that the sun weighs 1,989 billion billions of billion tons? Such astronomical sums defy our conceptual capabilities. We feel dizzy and fall silent in the knowledge that we grasp the nominal meaning of the words but not the reality for which they stand.

The same thing is true when, with respect to divine wisdom, we read that it is literally incomprehensible. We cannot even think out the thought. No one can. Everyone we consult, from Paul to the older biblical authors, stands speechless. There is nothing else they can do. Even some modern writers are absolutely clear about the fitness of such a holy silence. We earlier saw Tomas Tranströmer speaking of "aphasia." His later collection, *För levande och döda* (For the Living and the Dead), includes a poem called "Guldstekel," in which the poetic "I" warns against fanatical preachers who are all too sure about their subject: "How I detest the expression, one hundred percent of it!" In opposition to them, he confesses, "We are in the church of silence, in the piety of wordlessness." In fact, the only sensible thing to do in the presence of divine wisdom is to keep quiet, or, like Paul, to confess and offer praise: "For from [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

"... The Only Wise God"

Romans 16:27

Thus a paean of praise climaxes this second of the three texts on divine wisdom found in letters doubtlessly written by Paul himself. The third and final of these texts does the same thing: "To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 16:27). Here, through yet another literary means, the apostle emphasizes this wisdom's inaccessibility. In the first text (1 Cor. 1–2), he plays with paradoxes. In the second (Rom. 11:33–36), he poses questions that remain unanswered. Both times the intention is to indicate the gulf yawning between God's wisdom and our inadequate perceptions of it. Now, as he looks backward for the last time, he speaks quite plainly—and quite laconically—of "the only wise God." His very taciturnity indicates how radically he dismisses every attempt at comparison.

In his own day, the author of the Book of Job wrote something quite in line with this: "Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.' God understands the way to it, and he knows its place" (Job 28:20–23). Similarly, Isaiah writes, "To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One" (Isa. 40:25). And that is precisely the point: no comparison is possible. God is unique, incomparable, literally one of a kind when it comes to the way (*modus*) in which he is wise. Thoughts such as these are right in line with Paul's. In his first text he brazenly exchanges "wisdom" for "foolishness." In the second he speaks of a measureless deep and uses such privative adjectives as "unfathomable" and "inscrutable." The reality of this strikes him dumb with transported amazement. And then, not least of all, in the third text he excludes every conceivable comparison.

In all three cases, God's wisdom has no equal in the world with which we are familiar. In every case, God appears in one sense as an absent God. Thus, in these various ways, Paul shows what God is not. But can he truly do so without simultaneously revealing something about what God is?

The Practice of Looking Forward

We live in the present. We have no other choice. Only the present is real. But what would the present be were it not for time gone by and time yet to come? How can we have the strength to live in the now without remembering what has gone before and without anticipating something of what is yet to be? We need to do this, not so that we may escape the present, but so that we may find support through the reassurance of memory and the energizing effect of anticipation. And in any case, do not the past and the future somehow belong together? Every beginning cries out for continuation, indeed for fulfillment.

This must be Paul's reasoning when he reminds the Corinthians of the "gifts bestowed on [them] by God" (1 Cor. 2:12), that is, of the gifts they already possess. But he actually dwells more on coming gifts. Twice he mentions something looming on the horizon. That which "God has prepared for those who love him" (v. 9b), that which "God decreed before the ages for our glory" (v. 7), is something no human being would ever expect. We are thus promised a bright future, one that leads Paul, and us with him, to turn toward it, looking ahead.

He does this again in Romans when he speaks of those whom "[God] has prepared beforehand for glory" through his mercy, "including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles" (Rom. 9:24). According to Paul, then, it is our calling, our purpose, to have a part in the divine glory. What else does he have to say in Romans about this reality?

Twice Lost

He actually begins with a tragedy. In his introduction, Paul describes the deplorable condition of humanity before God intervened. He summarizes by saying, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). But once he has presented God's forgiveness, his reconciliation, his justification (these three terms are synonymous), he is able to demonstrate that "we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). Further along, with equal confidence, he once more mentions this same hope of glory (8:21–22) and assures that it will be revealed to us and made our own (v. 18). Thus, the reality of divine glory is first lost and then found again, at least in part. But it is also lost a second time, and in another sense: it is lost linguistically.

In the teaching section of Romans (chaps. 1–11), the Greek word *doxa* ("glory") occurs a dozen times. The frequency itself reveals the value Paul places on glory. His distressed tone when he describes the disaster of losing it, as well as his triumphant tone when he presents the possibility of our regaining it completely, attests to the fact that for him glory involves something particularly valuable, something that stirs up luminous associations within us. What associations are these?

Let us give some thought to the way languages develop. Like many other things, languages erode with time. Everything wears out, although some things wear out more quickly than others do; it is unavoidable. Coins that have been in circulation too long lose their originally sharp definition; so do words. One word that has especially suffered in this regard is none other than the word "glory." It has lost much of its former luster. It has paled; in fact, it has nearly "gone out."

In everyday speech the adjective "glorious" functions satisfactorily, as when we talk of glorious weather. But in the religious context it has acquired a strange tone, thanks to its misuse by certain excitable groups. Their bombastic jargon rings as false as does their programmed joy.

In public use, things are not much better with the noun "glory." Like any stock phrase, "the power and the glory" does not say much to the ordinary person on the street. And the expression "all the glory" means whatever it needs to mean. The term has taken on an ironic, sometimes almost obscene connotation. Glory has thus been lost to us twice, this second time verbally.

Among the reasons for this loss, beyond normal linguistic degeneration, we should probably reckon in historical circumstances. In the sixteenth century, for example, Luther rejected the *theologia gloriae* for a *theologia crucis*. Nevertheless, whatever the cause of the word's loss of meaning, the result is the same; it is in serious need of revitalization. It has lost its luminosity. Can we restore it?

A good way is to do so is to begin modestly, starting from the realities of the material world. Paul does not hesitate to use concrete images when speaking of our coming resurrection: "There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory (*doxa*) of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory"—*en doxē*, as it reads in Greek (1 Cor. 15:40–43).

Following the apostle's lead, we too can proceed from realities we are well acquainted with—perhaps, say, from fascinating meteorological phenomena. It can happen in cloudy weather, for instance, that the sun may suddenly appear from between two thick rain clouds. We see its rays spreading out from it as spokes from the hub of a wheel. Awkwardly perhaps, but in a way that stimulates the imagination, Christian artists have often used gilt wood to represent this phenomenon above an altar intending to suggest God's brilliant majesty. In the terminology of art history, a work like this is called a *gloire*.

Thanks to such associations with light, we can begin to form an appreciation for what Paul means by the word *doxa*, and thereby begin to restore its former luster. But Paul himself did not coin the word; he inherited it from his Jewish forefathers. Thus, it will be wise to review the various Old Testament texts he cites or alludes to in this connection.

Glory in the Old Testament

Occasionally in the Old Testament we hear of something that could be called an aesthetic experience. Christ put us on the right track the day he spoke of the lilies of the field. They neither work nor spin, he said. But "even Solomon in all his glory [*doxa*] was not clothed like one of these" (Matt. 6:28–29). King Solomon's glory is associated here with majesty and beauty. God's own majesty and beauty are praised in a number of cosmic psalms, among others in Psalm 104, which begins as follows: "Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment" (Ps. 104:1–2). Sometimes, a ravishingly aesthetic experience of a natural phenomenon is mingled with a sprinkling of fear. We see this in Psalm 29, whose author trembles in the face of a thunderstorm. He is so overwhelmed by its fury that he identifies it metaphorically with the voice of God: "The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; . . . and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'" (Ps. 29:4–5, 9). This frightening phenomenon confronting the poet is comparable to the one the Israelites encountered at the foot of Sinai. "On the morning of the third day there was

thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled" (Exod. 19:16). "When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die'" (Exod. 20:18–19). Here again, thunder is interpreted as the voice of God.

Again in Exodus, we see Moses climbing up the mountain by himself to confer with God, and we hear that God "used to speak to Moses face-to-face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exod. 33:11). This image, of course, is not meant to be taken literally; rather, it is a poetic expression of the strange familiarity between God and Moses. But this familiar intercourse was not one without risk. One day, at the top of this imposing mass of rock, Moses made bold to ask God for the thing that stood highest on his wish list: "Show me your glory, I pray" (Exod. 33:18). The Lord answered him mercifully: You do not know what you are saying! If I grant your request, you are a dead man! And in the words of the Bible:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, . . . [but] you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Exod. 33:19–23)

The glory of the Lord, then, while fascinating with regard to "majesty," is at the same time gravely dangerous. It is both something to delight in and something to tremble at, truly a *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*. This ambivalent effect is the subject of several texts, among them those in which one prophet or another relates the circumstances of his call.

Especially rich in this connection is Ezekiel's account, a text of profound literary dignity. What the prophet witnesses beside the River Chebar is so overwhelming that language is rendered nearly useless to him for describing it. Ezekiel is so smitten by the peculiar things he sees that he is reduced to using multiple approximations, qualifications, and reservations:

As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like

gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures . . . each of them had four wings.

In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; . . . Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads.

When they moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army . . .

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendor all around. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell on my face. (Ezek. 1:4–6, 13, 22, 24, 26–28)

Through repeated use of phrases such as “something like,” “something that looked like,” “in appearance like,” and “something that seemed like,” the prophet indicates both the similarity and the dissimilarity between the heavenly world and the earthly one he has experienced. By both bringing them together and keeping them distinct, he tries to make language exceed itself, for the simple reason that the realities he is attempting to describe exceed themselves as well. They are what they are, but not only what they are. Or perhaps better said: they are what they are to the eminent degree; they exceed every conceivable counterpart in our experience. The final impression is one of a massive superiority that leads Ezekiel the seer to throw himself face-down in the dust.

Every time a chosen person comes into close contact with the Lord, that person is caught up in both rapture and panic. Trembling, he falls to the ground, like Ezekiel, or hides his face with his mantle, like Elijah in the cave (1 Kings 19:13). At the very least he cries out, “Woe is me! I am lost!” as Isaiah

does after seeing the Lord seated on a throne, high and lofty, and hearing the seraphs calling to one another, "The whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isa. 6:1–5). The Greek word *doxa*, as well as its Hebrew equivalent *kabod*, is thus heavily loaded. It is a word deserving to be written in fire.

The glory of God, manifested in shocking natural phenomena and in strange visions, also manifests itself in historical events, sometimes called "the Lord's great works" or his "mighty deeds." Foremost among them, and most vivid in the collective memory of the Hebrew people, was their liberation from Egypt, narrated in the book of Exodus. The author depicts the Lord promising, "I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army" (Exod. 14:4). Then, after passing through the Red Sea, Moses and the children of Israel sing a lengthy song of victory, which runs, in part, as follows: "Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power—your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries" (15:6–7).

The word "glory," referring to God's enormous strength, his powerful majesty, and his breathtaking radiance, is truly a key word in the Old Testament. Well acquainted with these texts was the man who represented himself as "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5). What special meaning did he place in this traditional concept of glory?

The Glory of the Father

This Hebrew, this Israelite and descendant of Abraham (2 Cor. 11:22), this man who was first called Saul, received from Gamaliel a fundamental education in the hereditary Jewish law (Acts 22:3). Later he boasted that he had lived in accordance with Judaism's strictest sect (26:5). If we read his letters carefully, we can see that he actually was faithful to the traditional teachings. For him, too, glory was a characteristic belonging to God alone.

As early as 1 Thessalonians, he speaks of the God who calls believers into "his" glory (1 Thess. 2:12). In 2 Corinthians, he speaks of "the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:6). Similarly in Romans: what sinful humanity has exchanged for idols, as we hear in the beginning of the letter, is nothing less than "the glory of the immortal God" (Rom. 1:23). A little further on we read that, owing to this failure of trust, the human race has lost precisely this "glory of God" (3:23). But when we have been brought again through faith into fellowship with him, we nourish the hope of sharing in this "glory of God" (5:2). And then both the first major section of Romans and the epistle as a whole are rounded off with a doxology in the words, "to him be the glory forever, amen" (11:36 and 16:27).

Sometimes the matter is made more precise, in a direction deviating somewhat from Judaism. We hear of "the Father's glory." According to Luke's report of the first Christian Pentecost, Jews and proselytes both adopted Old

Testament formulas to speak of “God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). But the foremost of these deeds, in their eyes no less than in Paul’s, was that Christ had been raised from the dead “by the glory of the Father,” as it is expressed in Romans 6:4. In other words, Christ was raised through a brilliant manifestation of God’s power. This is echoed by Paul’s close disciple, who prays that “the Father of glory” (Eph. 1:17) will enlighten the eyes of his readers’ heart, so that they can see “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power [for them, the same great power that God worked] in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places” (vv. 19–20). A bit further on he offers another prayer to God, asking this time that “according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that [they] may be strengthened in [their] inner being with power” (3:16). In the Pauline corpus, then, glory is an attribute of the Father. But does this mean that no one else shares in it? What about the Son?

The Glory of Christ

In his first letter to Corinth, Paul claims, with rhetorical exaggeration, that he has determined to know nothing other than Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2)—in other words, nothing else than Christ disgraced. Yet only a few verses later, in the same pericope about God’s mysterious wisdom, he presents Christ as not only disgraced, but exalted as well: “None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (v. 8). “Lord of glory”—two heavily weighted words that in the Old Testament sometimes refer to Yahweh.

Here, in 1 Corinthians, Paul does not take the matter any further. But he does indeed do so in his second letter to Corinth (2 Cor. 3:7–4:6). There, among other things, he writes,

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world [the devil] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:3–6)

It is clear from the parallelism between “the gospel of the glory of Christ” and “the knowledge of the glory of God” that they have something in common with each other. Precisely because of his final revelation, the Risen One is presented as an image and a reflection of God’s own glory. He is the perfect icon of the Father.

This “icon” has drawn the attention of several biblical writers. It is as if they cannot get enough of him: “he is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15); he “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb. 1:3). As long as we wander upon the face of the earth, there can be no loftier object for our contemplation.

Our Own Glory

We have just seen, in 1 Cor. 2:2–8, how Paul contrasts the death of Christ with Christ’s exaltation through being raised from the dead. A similar contrast appears in Romans, but this time it applies to us: “if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also [later] be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17). Clearly this coming reality is very often associated with Christ. Thus in Philippians we read, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Phil. 3:20–21).

That is how Philippians puts it. But nowhere in the Pauline corpus are Christ and the hope of glory so intimately associated as they are in the letter to the Colossians. There we read of what is “laid up for [the readers] in heaven” (Col. 1:5). These readers are then urged to give “thanks to the Father, who has enabled [them] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light” (v. 12). And further on, speaking of the revealed mystery, the author tells his audience that “God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (v. 27). It is this very hope that looms in the background later on in the letter: “When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory” (Col. 3:4).

The apostle’s intimate circle, then, was convinced that we shall one day be glorified. But are we actually glorified already? There are at least two texts that throw light on this question, and both belong among the key passages on the subject: 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6 and Romans 8:17–30.

In the first of these texts, Paul reminds his readers that Moses was compelled to cover his face with a veil “to keep the people of Israel from gazing

at the end of the [reflection of divine] glory that was being set aside" (2 Cor. 3:13). He then claims that a veil still hangs over the faces of later Israelites (vv. 14–15)—metaphorically speaking—while the veil covering the faces of Christians is taken away once they turn in faith to Christ (v. 16). Paul summarizes in verse 18: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing [present tense] the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed [present tense again] into the same image from one degree of glory to another." In this way, Paul describes a process that is taking place now, here on earth.

The second text, which makes it clear that this process has already begun, runs as follows: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. . . . [And them] he also glorified" (Rom. 8:28–30). The unexpected past tense—an aorist in fact—is confusing. Still, it must surely imply that we are dealing here with something that has already been achieved, at least in part. But what can Paul have meant by being "conformed to the image of his Son"?

" . . . To Be Conformed to the Image of His Son"

To describe our relationship to God we often use such moral categories as sin and forgiveness, enmity and reconciliation, and so forth. Paul does this, too, sometimes. Yet more often than we realize, he also uses other categories: visual and even aesthetic categories. One feature of his writings, all too seldom observed, is their frequent use of such words as light, appearance, reflection, radiance, image, copy, likeness, face, change, metamorphosis, and the like. These words are related to one another in that they can all connote something beautiful and noble, something positive. But what do they actually have to do with each other? Of course, we can bring them together, experimentally or playfully, even ironically, as when we say that someone beholds her face in a mirror and sees, at best, something beautiful. This works in a secular context, of course. But what sort of semantic connection exists among these words in Paul's mind?

Clearly the most frequent of them are "image" and "copy," as for example in regard to humanity's fall and rehabilitation. When the apostle says that the sinful race has "fall[en] short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), we may reasonably understand him to mean that previously the race possessed that glory. Probably behind this text is the story in Genesis, according to which the original humans were created "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27), created "according to [God's] likeness" (v. 26). Humanity's purpose was, thus, to reflect in their own faces the face of God himself.

But we know how things turned out. Human beings, individually and collectively, “knew God, [but] did not honor him as God” (Rom. 1:21). “They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (v. 23; here Paul links up with Old Testament writers who ridicule cults and images of false gods). Or, summing up all that he has said so far: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen” (v. 25).

But we cannot disfigure the image of God without consequences. Through the discrepancy between what we know and what we do, we disfigure ourselves at the same time. Thanks to a kind of spiritual schizophrenia, a person’s very face ceases to be recognizable. Through being inconsistent, people have become distorted from what they were intended to be. Paul insists, “They became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (vv. 21–22). They had been intended to reflect God’s flawless beauty, but as a result of their internal rift, the mirror shattered. The loss of integrity entailed that God could no longer recognize his own features in this person, in what, from time to time, Paul calls “the old nature.” All that was left for God to do was to start from the ground up and bring forth a new humanity made in “the image of its creator” (Col. 3:9–10), or as Ephesians puts it, “created according to the likeness of God” (Eph. 4:23–24). Is this re-creation carried out directly, or is it done through an intermediary image or model instead?

Of course there was at least one person who truly was an “image of God,” namely, Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). He is thus the only one who can function as the prototype for the new humanity, the “firstborn within a large family” (Rom. 8:29b). God’s work of re-creation consists, then, in conforming human beings “to the image of his Son” (v. 29a). It is not easy to translate the adjective Paul uses here: *symmorphous*. It begins with the prefix *sym-*, which we render with such English morphemes as *co-*, *com-*, or *like-*, all of which refer to a kind of symbiosis. We might translate *symmorphous* with the phrase “similarly formed,” which indicates a transformation leading to a completely obvious family relationship.

God’s dearest wish is that we, his adopted children, might come to resemble the one who is the Son par excellence. Put another way, God’s ultimate plan can be described as aiming to restore humanity, just as an art expert slowly and carefully restores a damaged portrait, or as a plastic surgeon returns to a disfigured face its former beauty. And the model the divine surgeon follows in bringing about this transformation is Christ, his very own image.

Of course, fully manifested likeness with him is still a dream of the future, though something we are nonetheless destined for. Speaking of our

coming resurrection, Paul assures his readers that we will “bear the image of the man of heaven,” that is, of the new Adam, the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:49). Meanwhile, that likeness can be gradually realized here on earth. The apostle has given equally firm assurances that, by regarding the glory of God reflected in the face of Christ, we are already being changed into his image (2 Cor. 3:18).

Truly *doxa* is the ultimate word for what Paul means when he speaks of God and of our participation in the divine. In order to make this word shine even more clearly in our eyes and to make the reality it refers to even more attractive, we can conclude our exercise in looking forward by observing how the apostle characterizes that reality.

The Peculiar Nature of Divine Glory

When Paul writes about divine wisdom, he uses only negatives. Sometimes he praises God because God alone is wise, literally incomparable. Other times he is carried away by the thought that God’s wisdom is deep, unsearchable, unfathomable, even to the point of boldly depicting it as an un-wisdom, as foolishness. Whenever he deals with this divine attribute, all he can do is to deny, and deny, and deny again. Though he does so through various literary means, he always does it with the same radical force. But how does he handle a different divine attribute, the attribute of glory? Some texts are so rich that we willingly return to them, fully assured that they still have more to offer us. One such text is the following, addressed to the Corinthians:

[God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; . . . Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the People of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory; for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory! (2 Cor. 3:6–11)

It is striking here how frequently Paul compares corresponding realities: two kinds of service, two covenants, two successive manifestations of glory. Comparisons, of course, can go in two directions: they can bring things together as in some sense equal to one another, or they can show how they differ. In the one case, we focus on the similarities, and in the other, on the dissimilarities. In this text Paul does both. All three times, he draws a parallel

between two things while simultaneously contrasting them; all three times, he expresses his preference for the second, later thing, as somehow better than the first.

In other words, Paul argues from the small to the great: “how much more . . . much more does . . . much more has . . .” The tone is positive, testifying to Paul’s mounting admiration. He moves from affirmation to affirmation, even perhaps to “super-affirmation.” For, as a matter of fact, he does not actually argue from the small to the great, but from the smaller to the greater.

That is, as his point of comparison, he proceeds not from something insignificant, mediocre, or easily outdone, but from one of the most highly revered features of Jewish devotional tradition: the divine radiance reflected in the face of Moses. There at Sinai we witness perhaps the most remarkably elevating experience in human history. Yet Paul now insists that this extraordinarily exalted event is in fact as good as nothing in comparison to “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” as he is soon to phrase it (2 Cor. 4:6). This new manifestation of God’s outpoured radiance exceeds the former one in two respects: in part, it is simply more intense (3:7–8); in part, it is permanent—it endures, contrary to the earlier manifestation that soon faded (v. 11). Thus he summarizes, “Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory” (v. 10).

This “greater glory” deserves a moment’s further reflection. We do not always choose our every word when we speak; sometimes we use fixed formulations, even if they do not exactly reflect our intended meaning. It can even happen that we let the tongue run free, so to speak, without our cooperation, and let it utter innocent but meaningless exaggerations, such as “I am completely exhausted” or “I am unendingly grateful,” and so on. These little linguistic indulgences are treacherous. They leave us jaded, making it hard for us to take seriously authors who really mean what they do say.

Paul truly means what he says in this text about the overwhelming superiority of the divine glory in the face of Christ; his words here do not just slide mechanically off his lips. This is obvious from the fact that he very soon uses the same exaggerated tone in a new comparison. This time he speaks of the present and the future: “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (4:17). Thus, in his mind, there is no attributive strong enough to evoke the richness of the glory that lies far beyond all our meager experiences of abundance.

He speaks of richness and of weight. The text we just now cited reads like this in the King James Version: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). Paul is so overwhelmed, so overpowered by this disproportion in glory, that he returns to it in Romans: “I consider that the sufferings of this

present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

The Greek phrase translated here as "worth comparing" originally connoted weightlessness. It thus corresponds to the word "slight" (or the King James Version's "light") in the Corinthian text. In both Romans and 2 Corinthians, Paul experiences glory as an inconceivably great weight. In this he actually follows in the footsteps of his fathers. In the Old Testament the Hebrew term *kabod* pointed to precisely this thought of weight, mass. It was first applied to the importance of a wealthy, powerful man, to his weighty authority, before it came to be used of God himself and his own majesty.

"Deep Calls to Deep . . ."

We may now review the entire field and see how Paul carries out the practice of looking backward and forward, respectively. For him it is the difference between looking to the origin of things and to their goal. When he goes historically upstream, toward God's wisdom, toward the source of God's redeeming act, motivated as it was by his undeserved mercy, Paul claims to stand in the presence of an unfathomable mystery. When he turns downstream, toward the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation, he stands again before a similarly deep mystery. In the wake of grateful memories of what God has done in the past comes an eager, curious anticipation of what God will do in the future. Paul rejoices in advance over the promised vision of God's beauty. But looking backward or forward, he finds himself confronted by something defying our ability to understand. Deep calls to deep.

Meanwhile, he employs two types of literary moves. In the one case, he eliminates every conceivable comparison. In the other, he compares with decisive intent. He moves from the lesser to the greater. He draws parallels between two things, but always with a preference for the later one; his orientation is always toward the future. He goes from affirmation to affirmation, even to super-affirmation. That is, he multiplies superlative adjective: "overwhelming" and "beyond knowledge." He uses comparative formulations: "how much greater" and "how much richer"; and he avails himself of hyperbolic phrases that exceed the limits of normal linguistic usage: "an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" or "not worthy to be compared with." In this way he preserves the exalted mysteriousness of God, while at the same time being bold enough to say something about it.

Thus he is unceasingly working himself up to a climax. This very upward mounting scale is what Thomas Aquinas meant by the *via eminentiae*. God truly does possess glory, and he does so to an eminent degree.