

Romans 11:1-36 - God's kindness and sternness

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[0:00] Our reading today is taken from Romans chapter 11 and we're reading the whole chapter. I ask then, did God reject his people? By no means. I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham! from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people whom he foreknew. Don't you know what scripture says in the passage about Elijah? How he appealed to God against Israel? Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I am the only one left and they are trying to kill me.

And what was God's answer to him? I have reserved for myself 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal. So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace and if by grace then it cannot be based on works. If it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain? The elect among them did, but the others were hardened.

As it is written, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear to this very day. And David says, may their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see and their backs be bent forever.

Again, I ask, did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all. Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgressions means riches for the world and their loss means riches for the Gentile, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring? I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy.

If the root is holy, so are the branches. If some of the branches have been broken off and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafting in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this.

[2:54] You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.

Granted, but they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith.

Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God. Sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of the olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited. Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in.

And in this way, all Israel will be saved, as it is written, the deliverer will come from Zion. He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake. But as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs. For God's gift and his call are irrevocable.

Just as you were at one time disobedient to God and have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience, so that he may have mercy on them all. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay them?

[5:24] For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Thanks, Vanessa. Let's pray as we come to God's word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we want to pray and ask for your help this morning as we come to your words.

We are hungry for what you have to give us. We are thirsty for refreshment from your words. We pray please, Lord, that despite the weakness of the preacher, despite the weakness of all of us, you might be gracious to us by your spirit this morning. Speak to us for the sake of your glory and for our good in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Well, that's a really, really long reading. Okay.

Which is why my wife read it because I didn't feel like I could inflict it on anybody else. But let's start with a really obvious truth as we begin. It is really obvious, I hope, to all of us this morning that we can never fully know God. We know that, don't we?

You know, if we knew all that God knows, if we understood all that God understands, if we recognized all of God's ways and had no questions about what he did, why he did it, the way that he did things, then you know, don't you, that if that's the case, it's not the real God you're thinking about. That God is a God of your imagination. Because that's where he lives and is limited to. He's a made-up God, small enough for us to understand. Because the real God, the one who made us, the one who made this world and to whom this world belongs, that God is by very definition too big for us to understand fully. He is our creator and we are his creatures.

[7:36] And creatures never fully understand their creator. This is where the passage ends, isn't it, this morning? Look at verse 33. Notice how Paul talks about God.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?

Paul's conclusion after everything he has said, all the way to this point in the book of Romans, he goes, bottom line, I just don't understand God. I cannot fathom him. His judgments are unsearchable.

No one knows his mind or tells him what to do. God is God. But although Paul knows true things about God, though God has revealed himself and his ways to Paul, still Paul at the end of all of that, and at the end of all of that writing that we've been looking at, he still says, do you know what?

God is bigger and beyond all of my understanding. Notice this isn't just intellectual understanding, is it? It's not simply that God is more complicated than rocket science or brain surgery or whatever it is that's complicated to me or you. It is more than just that. It is that God himself is self-sufficient.

[8:51] It's not just that you cannot understand God. You cannot get God into a position where he needs you or me. We can't control God. We can't put God in our debt. Again, by very definition, we have nothing that God needs because we have nothing that didn't first belong to him that he gave to us. So we can't make bargains with him. We can't suggest, oh God, listen, you do this for me if I do that for you. We can't. God is free from obligation from us. Verse 35, who has ever given to God that God should repay them? No one. For from him and through him and for him are all things to him be the glory forever. Amen. Notice how Paul puts it, all things are from him. Everything that you have has come to you from this God. And so it stands to reason that you cannot give back to him what is already his so that he owes you. You couldn't borrow my car and hire it back to me to earn you money, could you? That would be unreasonable and unfair. And if you suggested it to me, I would say no.

Well, we can't treat God like that either. We can't use the lives that he has given us, the gifts that he has given us, the opportunities that he has given us, and say that we're going to spend them in a

way that then makes God obliged to treat us in a certain way. Now, just meditate on this for a moment. I don't know what it is that you do all week. I know some of you do some really complicated things, right? Some of you run complicated businesses or busy homes. Some of you understand the great mysteries of the universe, like how to rewire a home or how to keep time on a drum. I don't know any of those things. One of you at least knows how to navigate the back roads of Wilsden. I've been in the car with you. It was incredible. Perhaps you know multiple languages and you can hop between them at will. Listen, whatever it is, right? For all your greatness, the humbling truth is you have nothing that you haven't been given. The air that you breathe, the skills that we have, the hard work that we've been able to do, the opportunities that have come our way, the situation we were born into, the education we received or didn't receive, the crowd we fell in with, the tragedies and the triumphs we've met along the way, all of that has been in the hands of God, the one who is beyond our imagining, the one to whom we owe everything and before whom we have nothing. Even as we think those thoughts about him, we are on the very edges of the outskirts of the beginnings of what he might be like. Let me say to you, if you're not a Christian this morning and the thing that's holding you back from becoming a Christian is, I can't become a Christian yet because I still have questions. Maybe that's what you think.

You don't yet have all the answers. Well, it's helpful, isn't it, that while there are good answers to our questions in Jesus Christ, while knowing Jesus Christ is satisfying at a level that nothing else is, still when it comes to God, you will never have all your questions answered because God is beyond you.

He's beyond me. And so if you are saying, I am only going to trust in Christ when I arrive at a point at which all of my questions are answered, then what you're looking for is not faith because faith is not having all your questions answered, but is knowing who is trustworthy and reliable. Faith by definition recognises that God is God and we are not, and so we will not understand him.

Now, in a way, it would be easy to end our sermon there, wouldn't it? We go, well, okay, message for today is a hopeless task to think about God. Why bother? Well, not so fast because not knowing everything is not the same as not knowing something. You know, we can not have exhaustive knowledge of God, but we can have essential knowledge of God. And right in the center of chapter 11, in the middle of this chapter that ends with this declaration of mystery, Paul gives us two things about God that we need to understand and we need to consider. So take a look at verse 22, and this is where we're going to kind of launch off from the rest of the chapter from.

[13:13] Verse 22, consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God's. Sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness, otherwise you also will be cut off.

Now, the word consider there, it's literally the word see or behold in the old English. And the point is that these two things, the kindness and the sternness of God are visible or exposed in what Paul has been teaching. And he wants you and I to take care to see both those things this morning. He wants us to see God's kindness in salvation, but then also to see his sternness or his unbending justice in condemning wickedness. He says both are visible in the message about Jesus, the message he's been preaching, and both are important. So let's spend our time there this morning, seeing and thinking about the kindness and the sternness of God. And I have to warn you that seeing these things is going to take a bit of work. You may remember if you were here a few weeks ago that the obsession of Paul at the minute is the salvation of the Jewish people in the church in Rome. And he's asking a question that we're not really asking and engaging with a topic that we find more obscure and difficult.

And these two characteristics, the kindness and severity of God, come in the context of this ongoing discussion about the Jews and the Gentiles. So we're going to have to see what Paul says to Rome in AD 55 before jumping forward to London in 2026. So we've got our work cut out this morning. Let's start with the kindness of God, the kindness of God. God's kindness, says Paul, should be visible in his work in salvation in the church in Rome. His kindness to you is how he puts it in verse 22.

[15:06] And notice how this works. Paul's concern, remember, is the fact that only an apparently small number of his fellow Jews have come to faith in Christ. Most of them have rejected the gospel. The church in Rome is dominated by Gentile background believers, not Jewish background ones. And Paul has been wrestling with that. Why is that the case? It

troubles him deeply. But he concludes all is not lost. Verse 1, there are still some Jewish believers, including himself. Did God reject his people, he says? By no means. I am an Israelite myself, he says, a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin.

In other words, God hasn't completely rejected the Jews because, well, says Paul, I'm evidence of that. In fact, verses 2 to 6, it's like in Elijah's day, when Elijah thought he was the only faithful Israelite left, and God told him there were 7,000 others remaining. Now, you might not know that Old Testament story. Don't worry, you can look it up another time. Paul's point is simply that all the way through the Bible, God's people were a remnant amongst the ethnic Israelites. It was never everybody, but it was always somebody. And now that remnant of Jews who are following Jesus is still there, like Paul is.

A remnant chosen by grace is how he puts it in verse 5. But there's more to this, because the kindness of God is not just visible in the remnant chosen by grace, but God's kindness, and this is the tricky bit, is seen in the absence of Jewish believers as well. The absence of Jewish believers has been good for the Gentiles. Why? Well, because in God's kindness, the sternness of his hardening of Jewish hearts has meant that the gospel message has traveled beyond the Jewish nation to the Gentiles.

Listen to how he puts it in verse 7. What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened. That is written, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see, and ears that could not hear to this very day. Jump down to verse 11.

Again, I ask, did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all. Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring?

[17:31] Now, there's mystery in these verses. And you may well ask, goodness me, was there not another way of doing this? But that's not the point. The point is that we are to see God's moving of the gospel message between the Jews and the Gentiles. First, in the unbelief of the Jews to drive the message to the Gentiles, and then the belief of the Gentiles to draw the Jews in by jealousy, and then the drawing in of the Jews to bring it to all a glorious conclusion of some kind, we're to see in all of that, verse 22, the kindness of God at work.

How does that work? Well, in a mysterious but glorious way, what Paul is telling us is that the history of belief and unbelief in the world has been used by God not to minimize those that are saved, but to maximize those who are saved. So that even in this severity or the sternness of judgment, you see the kindness of salvation, as the message leaves the Jewish nation and goes into all the world.

There's an important point here. We've seen over these last few weeks in Romans that Paul is wrestling with the fact that many of the people who he loves the most, who he's concerned about dearly, have not come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. They are hostile, they're disinterested, they've even persecuted him for trying to tell them about Jesus. And that has broken Paul's heart, because he loves them, even more than he loves himself. But chapter 11 says, what he must not conclude from that is that their unbelief is a failure in God's generosity. In other words, Paul is not to look at his friends, his family, his fellow Jews who don't believe in the gospel and to go, do you know what, if I was God, I would have saved them, because I'm more generous than God is. If only God was as kind as I am, then all of these people would have been saved. But God's not as kind as I am, so they're not saved. No, he realized he can't say that. God's righteous judgment over unbelief is his kindness in sending the message around the world. God's kindness is unfathomably great. Now think about how that applies.

As you and I sit here this morning, our hearts break for the unbelief of friends and family. We live in probably the most unreached corner of London. We are surrounded by people who are rushing headlong for judgment, some of whom used to be in this room, but are no longer here.

And we don't understand all the whys and the wherefores of that, but what we must understand, what Paul is telling us here, we must understand that is not a failure of God's kindness.

[20:20] It's not that if God was as kind as I am, all those people would be saved. We cannot out-kind God. He is kindness itself. Now, you might say, well, that's a bit far-fetched, isn't it, Steve?

Prove that to me. Prove that to me. Well, just think at where you are and what you're doing this morning. You're in church this morning, and you're listening to the message about Jesus Christ, the gospel, the good news. You've heard it read. You've sung about it. What has been necessary to get you here this morning to this place? Well, for you and I to sit here this morning and hear about Jesus, it was necessary, wasn't it, for unbelieving Jews in the first century to throw out the apostles out of the synagogue so that they might go and preach to the Gentiles in their communities. Otherwise, the gospel would never have left Jerusalem or Judea. It required the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 to take the gospel to Samaria in Acts 8. It took the kind of zeal of Saul the persecutor to become Paul the missionary in order to get the gospel to the Gentile nations. It took the hostility of the Roman Catholic Church to Martin Luther's discovery of salvation by grace alone to push the gospel away from the ruling classes and into the streets and the fields. It took the burning of Ridley and Latimer in Oxford for their evangelical faith for people to understand that Jesus is more important than power. It took the Second World War to ravage this city to bring Caribbean migration to

London, who in the midst of racial hostility found spiritual homes in Baptist churches like ours, and it's their service to the Lord that's kept churches like this going. Then waves of Christians coming from around the world, especially from Africa, often fleeing war and poverty and persecution. The church in the UK has received a missionary force keeping the gospel light burning. All of that so that you could sit here, I could stand here, and we could hear about Jesus this morning. Don't forget, says Paul, the only reason you're here is because God is kind to you. You cannot outkind God. You cannot grasp God's kindness. You cannot bottom it out.

[22:46] So if you're a Christian this morning, you have to ask yourself, what more could God have done for me? What more could he do? And if you're not a Christian, you know that too, don't you?

What more could God do for you this morning? He has organized your own personal history, the history of the world, that you might be sat here this morning and hear a message about his own son who died on a cross that you might be forgiven, that you might receive the gift of glory that you could never earn, that you don't deserve, that you wouldn't be able to achieve given all the lifetimes in the world.

And he's brought you here, moving nations around you, so that you could be saved from hell for heaven. Why? Because he loves you and he's kind to you.

So we need to see God's kindness, but secondly, we need to see God's sternness. It's an unusual word in verse 22. Let's read the verse again. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God.

Sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness.

Otherwise you will be cut off. You also will be cut off. It's the only place in the Bible that that word sternness or severity, I think as some translations have it, is used.

[24:07] I don't think that should put us off though. Paul is pretty clear what he means. Notice the sternness of God is visible in his actions towards those who fell. In other words, God's sternness is not an irrational or illegitimate hatred of some people.

Rather, it's his righteous judgment on sin. It is his holding of people to account for unbelief. So notice that this sternness implies that unbelief is not God's fault, but our fault.

We fell, not him. This is, I think, where we go wrong with some of the things that we've been looking at over the last few weeks. And we're going to think more about this this evening. So if you've got questions, come back this evening.

It is not we shouldn't think that people are basically morally neutral, right, towards God. And then God kind of chooses randomly to save some people and randomly not to save others.

Rather, the point is, and this has been the point all the way through the book of Romans, is that all of us, without exception, are hostile to God. Paul puts it like this, doesn't he?

[25:11] All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Not some of the worst people in the world have fallen short of the glory of God, but all people, you, me, everybody. We're told in chapter 3, there is no one

who seeks God.

That means everybody, everybody in this room, everybody you've met. There is no one who understands. That's everybody, you, me included. Chapter 1 says, although we knew God by nature, we neither glorify God nor give thanks to him, but in our thinking we become futile.

We exchange the truth about God for lies. We worship the creature instead of the creator. And that is not just a few, that is all of us, without exception.

And the sternness of God is that in his justice, he confirms people in the unbelief they desired. And so the kindness of God in salvation is actually really a supernatural enabling.

The kindness of God is new birth, bringing in a new life that has new desires, that wants something different to what it wanted by nature, which is to follow God, to love him, to trust him, to live for him.

[26:24] And without new birth, we get what we always wanted. Life without God, stern judgment.

Now, we don't understand why some are left in unbelief, the unbelief that we all have by nature. But we do know that if God is holy and he is, that unbelief must be judged.

It must be judged. Paul describes the judgment as being broken off the tree. Verse 19, if you look at it. You will say then, this is the Gentiles speaking of the Jews, branches were broken off so I could be grafted in.

Granted, but they were broken off because of unbelief and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Here the picture is of a tree, isn't it? And belonging to God is belonging to the tree. The natural branches were the Jews who have been broken off because of their unbelief and Gentile believers have been grafted in.

[27:34] And the unbelief has led to the exclusion of the Jews from the tree of God's people, that Gentile believers might be included. But Paul is really clear, don't let that lead you to arrogance.

Because if unbelief leads to breaking off for the Jews, well, the same will be true for the Gentiles. Because God is stern, he says. He carries on in verse 25.

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited. Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

And in this way, all Israel will be saved. Here the point is very similar. If the Gentile believers are ignorant of how the sternness and kindness of God interact, they will become conceited.

You can imagine it, can't you? The Gentile believers, yeah, well, the Jews, they're yesterday's news, right? God has given up on them because he's now interested in me, right? He loves me because I'm amazing.

[28:34] Look at all these brilliant things I do. I'm not like those Jews. What have you forgotten? You've forgotten. You've forgotten that it's God's kindness that saved you. You think it's something to do with you. You've forgotten the sternness that comes when you rely not on God's kindness, but on your own efforts.

And so slowly but surely, they stop trusting God's kindness and begin to think there's something in themselves. That's the mistake, isn't it? The mistake that presumes on God's salvation.

It was the mistake that led to unbelief in the Jewish nation. And that sternness led to grace and kindness for the Gentiles. And so the Gentiles should not become conceited.

Instead, they should assume that God knows what he's doing with the Jewish people as well as with the Gentiles. And that God's kindness is working to maximize, not minimize, salvation. Look down at verse 28.

He explains it further. As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake. But as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs. For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.

[29:39] Just as you were at one time disobedient to God and now receive mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too now have become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you.

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience. For God's grace and his call is a result of disobedience, so that he may have mercy on them all. Now I grant you that these verses are difficult to pin down exactly what they might mean for what's going to happen in the future. Paul is not saying, though, that every Jew without exception will be saved. If he's saying that, his heartbreak in the last three chapters make absolutely no sense. He does also, though, seem to expect that over time there's going to be a revival of gospel fruitfulness amongst the Jewish nation. And while the detail of exactly how that will happen is unclear and people have different ideas and different views and you can come to your own, the principle is very clear, isn't it? That God's kindness and his severity in judgment are not opposed to one another but are working together. And God's sternness or severity in judgment is to serve his kindness in salvation, not the other way around. God is not kind because he likes to be stern, rather his sternness serves his kindness. [30:53] Both are true and both are important. And God is both at the same time without any contradiction, but both work for his glory. Now I think you might be a little confused this morning.

We've covered lots of ground. So let me try and bring this into land and show you how it applies. I want you just to imagine for a moment. Imagine as a church, we say, well, listen, we read this verse and we go, yeah, remember the kindness of God.

I'm all down for remembering the kindness of God. But remember also the sternness of God. Do you really want to be a church that remembers the sternness of God? Why don't we just delete that a little bit?

Why don't we just forget about it? Listen, nobody likes talking about the sternness of God. Nobody likes thinking about judgment. Nobody likes thinking about hell. Why don't we just forget it? It's unpleasant and it's uncomfortable.

We could just remove that idea from any of the songs that we sing. We could remove it from those sermons. You know, Steve, you could skip over those passages. You could get straight to Romans 12. It's great in Romans 12.

[31:58] Well, the problem is, and churches do that all the time, don't they? You know that. You can go to some churches, you'll never hear about hell or judgment. But you cannot do that.

Why not? Because if you lose the sternness of God, you also lose the kindness of God. Think about it.

If God is not stern. If God does not judge unbelief. If God is not hostile to selfish, self-serving, self-interested people as we are by nature.

Then you don't need God's kindness, do you? You just need to work a bit harder. You know that, don't you? If there's no judgment. If God doesn't judge every sinful unbelief.

If God isn't just like that, then you probably don't need his kindness. You just need to work a bit harder. But of course, we know we can't work harder.

[33:00] And that's actually the assumption that the Jews made, isn't it? They thought they were saved because of the heritage that they had. They said the right things. They were morally upright. And that unbelief led them to hell.

To a stern but righteous judgment from a holy God. So don't ditch God's holiness. In fact, it's only this ongoing understanding that God absolutely hates our sinful unbelief, which is what we all have by nature.

It's only understanding that that makes us throw ourselves on God's kindness. Only that that makes me keep relying on God and his mercy and grace and not myself.

Now, let me tell you, where do you see the sternness and the kindness of God on display? Well, we see it in Romans chapter 11, yes.

But you see it on the cross of Jesus Christ, don't you? There's no fudging or clouding the holiness of God at the cross, is there? Blood was spilled at the cross.

[34:03] Darkness fell as Jesus died on the cross. The cry of dereliction came up from God the Son on the cross. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Stern judgment falls. But you know that he is there not for his sin, but for your sin and mine. It is love, not nails, that hold Jesus to the cross.

That in his kindness we might be saved. So that you and I could say, with Paul, can't we? Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his path beyond tracing out.

Who has known his mind or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. Because Jesus died instead of me.

That I might receive his kindness even in the midst of stern and holy judgment at my sin. I don't understand everything. We will never understand it all.

[35:06] But we do know that a holy, righteous God loves us. And that's wonderful, isn't it? The stern God is a kind God.

And we see it at the cross. Let me pray. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, what can we say?

We are in awe of your majesty and your glory. We confess that we don't fully understand.

There are great mysteries at how you're at work in our world and our lives. But we know that we can never be more kind than you. Because you sent your son to die on the cross that we might be saved.

And we know that you're holy. Because it took the death of the son to forgive us. And so Lord, help us to remember both of those things. Not as if they're in opposition to one another.

[36:19] But as they come together to us in the work and person of the Lord Jesus. In whose name we pray. Amen.