

The Wisdom of God

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Good morning. We can find our reading on page 1138. That's Romans chapter 11, starting at verse 7. Page 1138. Romans 11, verse 7 to verse 24.

Let us read God's word. 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 transgressions, 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 Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring?

I am talking to you Gentiles inasmuch as I am the 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.

[2 : 05] 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 grafted in among the others, and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourselves to be superior to those other branches.

If you do, consider this. 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.

[3 : 30] Sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you will also 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 an 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?

This is the word of God. Well, good morning, St. Silas.

Thanks very much, Alan, for reading. My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the senior minister here at St. Silas. And it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at page 1138. That's where we're looking at Romans 11 in a series we're in as a church family in Romans.

And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet just to help you follow where we're going as we look at this chapter of the Bible. But let's ask for God's help. It's Pentecost Sunday, as James said at the beginning.

[4 : 57] We particularly are mindful of the gift of the Spirit. Let's ask that the Spirit helps us to hear God's voice and respond rightly. Heavenly Father, we are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is needed.

That we would listen to you. So we ask that by your Spirit you'll give us ears to hear, heads to understand, and hearts that are willing to accept your word for our good and for your glory.

Amen. Mysteries. There's this incredible documentary film, Searching for Sugar Man. I don't know if you've seen it. It's probably the best documentary ever made.

It's about Sugar Man is a musician. And in South Africa, during the anti-apartheid movement, he was very popular. Lots of people playing his songs, playing his records at rallies and things.

And nobody knew who Sugar Man was. That was the mystery. There were rumors that maybe he'd died. And there were rumors about ways he might have died. Maybe he set fire to himself on stage in a concert.

[6 : 06] All sorts of legends about Sugar Man. But no one could find him. And two journalists in South Africa eventually decided to look for him. And they searched and searched. Eventually found Sugar Man working in a car factory in Detroit, where he'd always lived.

He had no idea that his music was popular in South Africa. And they flew him there. Mystery solved. Here he is. And he did concerts for thousands of people. It was amazing. We love it when a mystery gets uncovered.

And maybe we think, when we think of mystery of Hercule Poirot in a room at the end of the programs, at the end of the books, finally showing you the resolution to the mystery. Or maybe we think about scientists and biologists bringing out in the news how they found the answers to mysteries about the world.

But we love it when a mystery gets resolved. And that's what's going on in Romans chapter 11. There's a key verse, really, in verse 25, just after the bit we had read. If you just have a look there, what Paul says is, I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters.

So through the whole chapter, he's revealing a mystery. So that it's not a mystery for us anymore. And we're going to follow that through the chapter. And you can see on the outline in the notice sheet as well, that that verse, verse 25, really explains the whole mystery.

[7 : 25] But we'll see it through the chapter. So the first part of the mystery is Israel has been hardened in the past. That is, hardened towards God.

And Paul summarizes that in verse 7 of chapter 11. If you have a look there. Now that's the big issue that the Apostle Paul has been dealing with since the beginning of chapter 9 of this letter that he wrote to the church in Rome.

By Israel, he means the ethnic descendants of Abraham. The people that are the Jewish race, if you like. It's good to mention at the outset here, that I don't think these chapters have got anything to do with political Israel, the nation today.

When we think of Israel today, we perhaps think of how we hear of it in the news. So we think of the nation that's in the Middle East. We might think of the issue of whether the Jewish people have the right to a land of their own.

The difficult issue of where that land should be. We might think about the Palestinian people, about the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the occupied territories. It is a very difficult political issue today.

[8 : 42] And it's worth saying there are fine Christians in the UK today, and around the world, we perhaps especially think of America, there are fine Christians whose support for political Israel today is connected in some way with their understanding of Bible passages like this.

But for my money, I don't think it's right to draw those connections. That's not what these chapters, Romans 9 to 11, are actually about. When Paul talks about Israel here, he's talking about the Jewish people, ethnically descended from Abraham.

And when he talks about their salvation, he's not talking about lands today in the world. He's talking about their spiritual condition, where they stand with God. Now, in Old Testament times, Israel were God's people.

They'd been chosen by God, rescued by him, made into a great nation, brought into the promised lands, given his commandments. The scriptures they were given, which we now have as the Old Testament promise, the Messiah that would come.

And then when Jesus came, fulfilling those promises, the Messiah, God's promised rescuing King, if you looked at Israel as a whole, they didn't accept the claim that Jesus was the Messiah.

[9 : 59] And if you're a Christian in the first century, that is a really big issue. You're going to a church, you belong to this new community, God's new community, but you're looking at the Jewish people who had the Bible, and they've rejected the claim, you now believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

And as well as perhaps making you feel uneasy about what you've come to believe about Jesus, you're also thinking, is God really trustworthy? I mean, if they were God's people, did he abandon them?

And if he abandoned them, could he abandon me? So Paul summarizes what we've heard so far about that in verses 1 to 10 of chapter 11. And he's making the point, God didn't abandon Israel.

Israel has rejected him, and they're responsible for that. We saw that last week. But also, there's always been a remnant within Israel who have accepted God's promises. So he says that in verse 1 of chapter 11.

I ask then, did God reject his people? By no means. And then he uses himself as an example. I'm an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin.

[11:03] And then he says, that's how it's always been with Israel. So it was never the whole of Israel that was saved. In fact, in Elijah's time, he thought he was the only one left. And God had to say, no, there's a remnant among you.

And so it is today. So verse 5, he says, so too at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace. But the others, verse 7, he says, the others were hardened.

God has hardened them against him. That is, he has confirmed them in their unbelief. Not that he started their unbelief. They started, turned away from God.

And God has hardened them against him. He has not enabled them to turn back to him. Now, is that wrong of God? Well, no, of course not. Because they made the choice to turn away from God. And Paul demonstrates that with the quote in verses 9 and 10. He quotes a psalm to say that that's being fulfilled in Israel's rejection of Jesus. It's the psalm by King David, where David said, may their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them.

[12:13] May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see and their backs be bent forever. Now, David was the king of Israel when he wrote that psalm. And he's writing about the enemies of David who were turned away from him.

What Paul is doing, controversially, is saying, just as those people didn't deserve grace and mercy from God as they turned away from God's king at the time, so Israel today, if they decide that they stand against God's chosen Messiah, his king, then they are no different.

They are enemies of God if they stand against his king. And that's their choice. So if God sees them in that rebellion, and instead of saving them, he hardens them and turns them away, he's just giving them what they want.

It's the same for us today. Fundamentally, there are two ways to respond to God and his promises. We can say, thy will be done, and turn back to him.

Or we can say, in our life, my will be done. And when we think about the judgment of God, in a sense, it's just God giving us what we've chosen. If we go through life saying, not thy will be done, but my will be done, God will confirm that choice.

[13:27] And we'll stand outside of his grace. So how do we kind of apply that to ourselves? Well, look at verse 22, a bit further down, where Paul tells us what to consider when we look at Israel.

He says, 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. It's challenging, isn't it? In our culture, we're perhaps very happy to think about God's kindness. We're a lot less comfortable thinking about the sternness of God.

Just think what the reaction would be if we put a banner up outside of our church saying, come in and hear about the sternness of God. If we put on our website, we're at St. Silas, we believe in the sternness of God.

We wouldn't get a great reaction, would we? And in a sense, that's right, isn't it? Because when we look at how God really ultimately reveals himself to us, it's in the sending of Jesus in an act of great kindness and love for the world.

[14:36] Jesus dying on a cross to redeem mankind. So we see, in terms of God's qualities, his character, front and center, we see love and kindness.

But there's a right way in which we need to accept that that kindness, another aspect of it, is a sternness in the goodness of God. So that we don't take God lightly.

It's so easy to get complacent about God. About the Christian life. We can't see God. We hear a lot about his kindness. And that is true, and he is wonderfully kind.

But we do have to continue in that kindness. We have to keep trusting him. Keep the faith. And if we drift away from that in the Christian life, so that eventually we drift into unbelief, not trusting him anymore, then we might come under his sternness.

So friends, if you feel that you've been drifting away from God, if you examine your own heart towards God, and you feel you've been drifting a bit, could you come back to him and just draw near to him, knowing that when you do that, you encounter his kindness, his welcome, rather than

drifting further and ultimately experiencing his sternness?

[15 : 53] And for all of us, we just need to learn that lesson from Israel so that we are more deliberate about staying in the kindness of God. God has given us ways to do that.

Sometimes we call them means of grace, ways that God sustains us in our faith. They're the simple things. Daily Bible reading, time with God every day, a deep prayer life, meeting with God's people every Sunday, making that the priority in our lives for fellowship and encouragement, serving God with our gifts, taking bread and wine at communion, at the Lord's Supper, getting baptised.

These are means of God's grace to us so that we stay in his kindness rather than drift away. But Israel did drift away. And what Romans 11 is saying is it was all part of God's great plan.

That's this mystery that's being revealed. The first part, Israel has been hardened in the past. Now, why did God allow that? That's the second part of our mystery.

And it's this. A wild olive shoot has been grafted in in the present. Paul says that most clearly in verse 25 in his summary. He says, I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited.

[17 : 10] Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. So in this chapter, the human race is being divided into two groups.

The Gentiles are everyone who's not Jewish. So if you're here today and you're not ethnically Jewish, which I think probably is most of us, we are the Gentiles. And what Paul's saying here is extraordinary, that the reason that Paul, that God hardened the hearts of Israel was in order for God's grace and kindness and saving word to go out to the nations.

And if he hadn't done that, I take it, we wouldn't see what we see in the church today all over the world, that the nations have come to faith in the Jewish Messiah in such an astonishing way.

So if you look at the world today and you look at the church, it's overwhelmingly Gentile. And we're so used to that, it's easy to forget what a miracle it is that we, the nations, have been saved by the Jewish Messiah.

Paul gets it across with a botany lesson or maybe it's tree surgery. I'm not sure. In fact, I looked up, I think it might be arboriculture. Arboriculture. That's what it is.

[18 : 27] And it comes in verse 17. If some of the branches have been broken off and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted 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. You do not support the root, but the root supports you. It's an extraordinary picture of the church today that the people of God throughout history, you could picture it as God's tree, an olive tree.

It's living, growing, fruit-bearing, interdependent, organic. That's the people of God, the church. And the root is the family tree of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, King David, and so on.

And the olive tree has been grown and cultivated by God. He's looking after his tree. And then some of the branches stopped bearing fruit. They symbolize unbelieving Israel as the Messiah came and they rejected him.

Now we've got a vine in our back garden. Quite strange to have one in Scotland. But this happened to our vine last year that actually some of the branches were clearly dead. And so I got these pruning shears out.

[19 : 41] Don't really know what I'm doing. But you cut back these branches and then what happens this year is you get all this growth as the dead is taken away and there's new life. Now in Paul's picture here, something bigger happens than that.

When God took his pruning shears out on his olive tree and he cut off the unbelieving Israelites, he had space and he went out and found wild olive shoots.

That symbolizes the Gentiles, us, the nations. And he grafted them on to the olive tree that he's been growing. Now he gives us that picture to show us how overwhelming it is the kindness of God to us.

We are so unlikely people to be counted within the people of God. We were out there in the wild and when God's own people rejected him, he went out and found us to graft us into his tree.

But the temptation as we hear that is that it makes us think there must be something special about us. We must be superior to those branches that are down on the floor dead because we got grafted in.

[20 : 52] And Paul is determined that we the church would never think that towards the Jewish people or to anyone else. So in verse 20 he says, they were broken off because of unbelief and you stand by faith.

In other words, you're only in the tree because of your faith. You only stay in as long as you keep trusting Jesus. And he goes on to ask how easy it would be for God to cut you off and graft them in again.

Verse 23, 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 an olive tree that is wild by nature and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

See what he's driving at. He wants us to be humble about having been saved. In terms of human history, it is not natural that any Gentiles like me, like many of us here, would be trusting in the Messiah and counted as God's people.

It's a shocking reversal that no one expected that Israel would be hardened to the Messiah who came and God would save us, the most unlikely of people. And that shocking reversal should humble us.

[22 : 13] We're used to the idea, aren't we, that if you get chosen, it makes you proud. The new players in Scotland's football team, last night Steve Clark's first match in charge and there was this controversy about, oh, he's dropped some players and he's picked some new players and some of them are people who were playing for him at Kilmarnock and there was all this stuff.

But if you're picked for the first time for Scotland, maybe you think, there must be something special about me that I got picked and you look down on the people in your position who were not picked because it's on merit.

Maybe we'll see that with the selection for the next prime minister going on at the moment. Michael Gove on the TV today announcing what he would do if he was chosen. But there's these 11 MPs and one of them is going to be chosen to be prime minister and maybe the one who's chosen will face the temptation to look down on the contenders who didn't get chosen.

But Romans 11 is saying we would never think like that in the church about being saved. God's choosing of people from the nations to replace unbelieving Jews in his tree was not because any of us deserve it.

It was not natural. It was a shocking reversal and it humbles us to be chosen like that. And it's important to think about that because the real tragedy when we read Romans 11 is that it's not been followed in history.

[23 : 35] It's been ignored by Christians. The church has been proud and looked down on people who were not Christians. And Jewish people in particular have been very cruelly treated.

In our nation when our nation should have been looking at the Bible for its values Jewish people through the centuries have been horribly treated. Jewish people have been very badly treated by the church by Christians.

and we have to seek forgiveness for that from the Jewish community for the way that through history and the church has treated Jewish people. What Romans 11 reminds us is that when a Jewish person sees that Jesus is the Messiah there is something natural about that.

We're the unnatural branches. And I wonder if there's a real chance in our culture to reflect this today because anti-Semitism is worryingly on the rise isn't it in our culture across Europe across the UK.

It's been a major problem for the Labour Party in the news. How do we respond to that as Christians? The temptation perhaps is to think well it's not really our problem. Well surely as Christians our calling is to stand up for the vulnerable whoever they are anyway.

[24 : 52] We want to be there supporting people who are not being treated well. But for Jewish people there's even more reason for us as Christians to respect and uphold the Jewish community.

We treasure them because we've been grafted into a family where the root and the trunk are Jewish. We thank God for them and we have a real humility about the chance that we've been given while they've rejected the Messiah to discover him for ourselves.

And it's only natural we should pray for them earnestly. How easy it would be for God to graft them in again. For them to see that Jesus fulfills their scriptures that they study week by week in the synagogue.

And Paul reminds us God is doing that with a remnant all the time. There are remnants there are people within the ethnic Israel community seeing who Jesus is and coming to faith. He's doing that in every generation. But there is something else to look forward to and that's the third part of the mystery that Paul reveals here. So let me just go through the three parts. Israel has been hardened in the past verses 1 to 10.

[26 : 05] A wild olive shoot has been grafted in in the present verses 11 to 24. And then thirdly all Israel will be saved in the future. So look at the end of verse 25.

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.

Now this is a really difficult thing and it's an extraordinary thing but it does take a bit of work. The question is what does Paul mean here by all Israel? What does he mean all Israel will be saved? And I'm just not sure so I'm going to give you three things he could mean. And I'll tell you which one I think. So he could just mean the people of God.

The new Israel made up of the faithful remnant of Israel of the Jewish people through history along with the Gentiles who turn to Christ. We are the new Israel when he says all Israel will be saved.

[27 : 06] That might be what he means. Lots of people think that and they might be right. The problem is that for Paul to mean that here he'd have changed to a new meaning of the word Israel that he hasn't used yet so far in the argument which is quite confusing and by the time you get to verse 28 he's clearly talking about ethnic Israel again and the Gentiles.

He clearly has that distinction in mind. He goes back to it. So it seems a bit odd to me that he would mean that. So what else could he mean by all Israel being saved?

Well he could still be talking about ethnic Israel and he might just mean the faithful remnant within Israel through all the ages will be saved. That's a widely held view today and it might be right. Paul has used the term Israel like that so far in Romans in chapter 9. He said this. He said in chapter 9 for clarity not all of Israel are Israel.

And what he meant was not all of ethnic Israel are part of that faithful remnant of chosen people. Perhaps he means the same thing here when he says all Israel will be saved.

[28 : 20] That all the remnant will be saved. I don't think he means that. The problem with that is that it's so obvious by now between chapters 9 to 11 that the faithful remnant will be saved that it would hardly be worth saying.

It's not much of a mystery. It's quite it's a bit of an anti-climax if he just means well the ones who do see who Jesus is through history are going to be saved. And there is another problem with that view as well and it's what leads me to the third view.

The third view which I take is that what Paul means by all Israel is that at some point in the future there is going to be a great many of the Jewish people who are alive at that time who are going to see that Jesus is the Messiah and they're going to be saved.

So many of them that just as we might look at Israel today and say they're not saved we would see so many Jewish people come to faith in Christ we could say Israel has been saved.

I think that makes best sense of the other hints in the chapter. So let me just show you them. One is in verse 24. Look at how Paul uses the olive tree parable. The olive tree is the people of God.

[29 : 35] Look at how he finishes it. He says how much more readily will these the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree. It looks to me as though he's pointing to a time in the future when that's going to happen.

And then it's even more clear in verse 12. So he says in verse 12 just look at that if their transgression that's Israel falling away if their transgression means riches for the world that is that the Gentiles have come to faith and their loss means riches for the Gentiles how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring.

So what could he mean by their full inclusion? I think he means a future time when ethnic Israel comes to call on Jesus as their Messiah. That's the full inclusion.

Now when will that happen? In verse 15 Paul says this if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world that is that the gospel came to the nations what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

So what does he mean by that? It's resurrection day isn't it? When Jesus comes in glory and the dead are raised that's resurrection from the dead. So that's what I think these verses are promising.

[30 : 53] I might be wrong but it fits with verse 25 saying that the salvation of the Jews all Israel is saved after the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

I think that's quite exciting. I don't know what you think. The idea of a great Jewish revival that's going to come around the time that Christ comes in glory as he returns a time just before the very end when the spirit will open the eyes of an overwhelming number of Jewish people and they'll receive Jesus as their saviour.

That's what I think chapter 11 is saying. And it's striking when you look at the other nations when you read the Bible and you read about these other nations you read about the Amorites and the Amalekites and the Hittites and the Babylonians and the Assyrians and we can't see them today in the world.

None of them is left but God has preserved right through the ages a distinctive ethnic group Israel. Could it be that there are days coming in the future when they receive Jesus as their Messiah and they become leaders in the Christian church from every nation as Jesus comes in glory?

If that's right then we should pray for it. We should pray that God will draw Jewish people to himself through Jesus and that Jesus will come soon.

[32 : 14] And we should work towards it not politically but spiritually. Even if it's just in confidence from this chapter that God does have a remnant in Israel who is saving in every generation but we do that in hope and expectation of a great harvest among Jewish people that they would see who Jesus is.

And we should be bold with our own Jewish friends to share Jesus. And we should be humbled by God having this plan across history that he would save the Gentiles when everyone would have least expected it.

And perhaps in the future he will save the Jewish people just when everyone would have least expected it. That is a big God to have a plan like that and to sweep us up into it.

And it leaves the Apostle Paul concluding with these magnificent verses in 33 to 36 really summarizing the whole of how he feels after writing chapters 1 to 11. He quotes Isaiah 40 about God's great wisdom.

He says who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? He quotes Job 41 about God's mercy. He says who was ever given to God that God should repay them?

[33 : 33] And he sees who gets the glory. Verse 36 For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Let me lead us in a prayer like that together.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Using verse 36 there. Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out. We praise you God only wise mighty God for your great plan which is too lofty for us.

We praise you and thank you for your mercy that you would give salvation to us. Help us we pray to consider your kindness and your sternness that we would always walk in your kindness and we pray for Israel Father.

We call out to you for Abraham's descendants our Jewish friends and neighbours who have the scriptures and yet have not seen Jesus as the fulfilment of all of them.

[34 : 46] Father please would you save them. Would you open their eyes in your goodness and we pray that Jesus will come soon. Amen.