

God's Grace and Wisdom Are Without Limits

Romans 11:25-36 (NIV): 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, 26 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. 27 And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.' 28 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, 29 for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. 30 Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, 31 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. 32 For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. 33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 34 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 35 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?' 36 For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

For decades we have not seen so much suffering, so much bitterness, and so much brutality as we do now. You can see it in the many war zones around the world, and you can see it in the many disasters that keep happening as well. Just in these past days, many people were killed again by bomb terror in Kyiv; people in Iran are executed like cattle day after day; and in Germany, a person drove into a crowd indiscriminately — apparently with the single goal of killing as many people as possible. In all these catastrophes and tragic fates, it always seems to be the wrong people who are struck. People who apparently wanted no harm are killed, while others, who scheme their evil deeds behind the scenes, go free. And the question is: why? Why does God allow evil? And why does one person suffer while another prospers? The same question can be asked in other situations. In some countries there are not enough intensive-care beds to care for the sick. A decision has to be made: whom do we save, and whom do we allow to die?

In such a situation, it is a luxury to even ask the question: "Is everything above board here?" Or: "Is it fair that some make it and others don't?" Perhaps anyone who has managed to flee to Europe could ask the same question: Why am I safe, while my brothers and sisters continue to suffer? No — it isn't only refugees who can ask this; all of us can! Why was I born in a country where I can live safely? Why am I allowed a good education while others are not? Why have I never had to go hungry, while for others famine is an everyday reality? Why did I have a loving family and a good upbringing, while others grow up in a family where they are abused and neglected?

The apostle Paul asks a similar question in the letter to the Romans. After explaining, with fine theological skill, how we human beings are saved by grace alone through Jesus Christ, and how nothing can separate us from the love of God, he arrives at the question: But what if a person has not yet heard this message? Or: What if an entire people rejects this message? He is speaking specifically about his own people, the people of Israel. And Paul certainly does not treat this question lightly. His words radiate deep distress and profound grief. He would rather have staked his own salvation if it meant that his own people could be saved through Jesus. But now he knows that neither he nor anyone else can bring about salvation for another person. And precisely for that

reason, his words are filled with deep distress and helplessness. What will become of the people of Israel?

Why is it that I, of all people — someone who killed Christians — heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and was baptized, while others cannot believe and can have no benefit of Jesus Christ? Is that fair?

In today's sermon text we notice that Paul in no way looks down on the Jews or despises them. Just as little should we look down on people who cannot believe, or cannot yet believe. We should not consider ourselves wise — that is the apostle Paul's quick answer. And yet Paul still feels great pain with regard to his own people, the Jews, who do not want to or cannot believe the Gospel. "Does this grace not apply to the Jews?" he asks. This fact troubled and deeply moved Paul his whole life long. Remarkably, Paul does not conclude that these Jews must be worse than everyone else. He does not rail against their unbelief, but is convinced that God's grace will one day apply to them as well. That is why in the end he goes into the praise and worship of God whose love prevails even against the disobedience of the Jews. Gentile Christians should certainly not exalt themselves over the Jews. In doing so, they would be striking out God's mercy and grace. They would merely be boasting about themselves and failing to recognize that they themselves were saved by grace.

So "God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." This is how Paul concludes his argument. He understands salvation entirely from God's perspective. This applies to all of us. No one can pat themselves on the back for the things God has given out of pure grace! Likewise, no one may look down on people who are less fortunate than we are.

Regarding the Jewish people, Paul even argues that the Israelites were hardened for a time so that Gentile Christians could come to faith. The word "hardening" means that something has become tough and impenetrable. It is often thought of in terms of a stone. In a figurative sense, it means that people's hearts are like stones. They are not receptive to God's word. They also cannot distinguish at all between good and evil, between right and wrong.

Biblical history repeatedly tells us of people who were hardened in this way. The best-known example from the Old Testament is Pharaoh. Even after ten plagues, which God sends quite clearly as a warning, he still refuses to listen to Moses and to God. The prophets of the Old Testament likewise speak of this again and again. The people of Israel, who had heard God's word and experienced his wonders so clearly in their midst, nevertheless remained far from God and refused to keep his commandments. Jesus, too, speaks of people being blinded, so that they can neither recognize God nor are willing to hear his word.

The Bible is actually full of examples of people being hardened — if we take it seriously, this is true even from the very first pages of the Bible! Adam and Eve were deceitfully seduced by the serpent, so that they despised God's word and listened to the serpent instead. Indeed, hardness of heart has really been part of human nature from the very beginning. How often does God's word bounce off my hard heart! It does not get through, it does not touch me, and it certainly does not lead to a new way of life. How often is it rather the case that God's word is quickly forgotten, or crowded out by the worries of the day, so that it produces no change at all in my life? How often do I pray to God to forgive a sin, only to fall right back into that very same sin immediately afterward? When someone does come to believe, it is the bright light of the gospel and the love of our Lord Jesus that shines in our hearts.

In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul explains this very thoroughly and very clearly. The gospel is humanity's great liberation from the powers of sin and death. Both salvation and new life are grace alone!

Yet our world history is not over. Most Jews still do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. There is still terrible suffering in our world. We still see people committing terrible atrocities. How easily one is drawn into the pull of hatred and revenge! How logical the calls for retribution and condemnation seem against those who do such things in God's name. But the moment I condemn these people, or judge them unworthy to receive the gospel, I condemn myself. For that would mean that we deserve God's grace more than others do.

World events will take their course. There will be wars until the bitter end. In faith, God invites us to recognize God's open arms even for the worst wrongdoer. The invitation to repentance applies to Judas just as it does to those Jews who crucified Christ, and to those who persecute Christians today and cause immeasurable suffering and bloodshed in our world. Instead of hating people, we can, together with Paul, recognize the grace of God that is there for us:

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ... For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Romans 11:33, 36, NIV)