

The Turning Left Open

1

There is a sentence in Romans that has been doing the wrong job for about a hundred and fifty years.

The kindness of God leads you to repentance. You will have heard it at the warm end of a sermon, aimed at the person at the back who has not come forward. God is not angry with you. He is kind. Come.

That is not who Paul is talking to.

Go back one paragraph. Chapter 1 has just finished a list – idolatry, cruelty, every kind of wrong – and any reader with a conscience has been nodding along at other people for about twenty verses. Then chapter 2 opens, and the sentence turns round: *therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.*¹ Not them. You, the one agreeing with me.

And it is to that man – the one who has been keeping score through the whole list, reading it as a description of other people, satisfied that he is on the right side of it – that Paul says: do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

It is not a comfort. It is an accusation. You have mistaken his delay for his indifference. Nothing has stopped you yet, and you have filed that as a

verdict in your favour.

And notice what that man has just been doing with chapter 1. Paul says the wrath of God *is revealed*, and the verb is present tense – it is being revealed now, in what is happening to people. It is not a rumour about the future. It is legible, and the man with the clipboard has been reading it all along. He looks at the wreckage and uses it to work out where he is standing: that happened to him, not to me. Paul's answer is that it is the same road, at a different mile marker.

2

Three words, and each is doing its own work.

Chrēstotēs is kindness – not niceness, but the quality of someone who is good to you at their own expense. *Anochē* is holding back, the hand not brought down. *Makrothymia* is the long temper, and behind it stands the Hebrew *erek appayim*, slow to anger, which is the phrase God used when he introduced himself on the mountain.

Put together they describe something very specific: space. Time he has given, and gone on giving, when he had every reason not to.

And the charge is that we spend the space proving we do not need it.

The cross does not change his mind about us. It makes visible what he had already said about himself, on a mountain, to one man, with his hand over his face.

This is why the verb matters. Paul writes *agei* – the kindness *is leading*, present tense, at work on you now. Not a mechanism that has already

delivered its result. A thing he keeps doing, which most of us keep declining.

Repentance is a word Paul almost never uses. The one time it turns up in this letter, it is hung on kindness rather than on fear. Not on the list in chapter 1. Not on the judgment in chapter 2. On the patience that everybody had already decided meant nothing was wrong.

3

The way to see what that sentence is carrying is to take it out.

Lift chapter 2 verse 4 from the letter and nothing obvious collapses. The argument still runs. Wrath is revealed in chapter 1, guilt is universal by the end of chapter 3, and a way out is provided. It reads perfectly well.

But four things quietly stop working.

In chapter 3, God's patience loses its reason. Paul says that God put Christ forward as a demonstration of his righteousness, *because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins*. The word for passing over, *paresis*, appears nowhere else in the New Testament, and it is not a word for forgiveness. It means letting something go by. Centuries of letting it go by, which is exactly what chapter 2 described – and without chapter 2 there is no account of what that patience was for. It becomes an unexplained gap in the record.

In chapter 9, the same word turns up again: God endured with much patience the vessels of wrath. And in chapter 11, summing up the whole mystery of Israel and the nations, Paul writes *note then the kindness and the severity of God* – the same word as 2:4, *chrēstotēs*, three more times in a

single verse. Chapter 2 is where Paul opens that subject. Without it, chapter 11 is answering a question the letter never asked.

In chapter 12, the ethics lose their motive. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies.* Every practical thing Paul asks for in the last five chapters hangs on that therefore. Not on threat. On mercy already received. Remove the chapter where mercy was shown working on a person, and the sentence floats.

The fourth one is the one that matters.

Without it, the gospel changes shape. What is left is wrath revealed, guilt established, and a mechanism for escape – and the thing you are escaping is God. Christ becomes the way out of the hands of the Father. That is not a doctrine anyone writes down; it is a shape that forms in people's heads when the kindness is missing, and a great many people in church are living inside it.

With 2:4 in place the letter is doing the opposite. The patience was always there, and it was always purposeful. The cross does not change his mind about us. It makes visible what he had already said about himself, on a mountain, to one man, with his hand over his face.

So it is not a gentler verse set beside the hard ones. Take it out and the rest of the letter stops standing where Paul put it.

4

I have known all that for years. What I wanted to find out was whether I could say it.

So I set out to tell it to an eight-year-old. Not as a teaching exercise. As a test. A thing you cannot say plainly to a child is usually a thing you have not finished understanding – you can get a long way on vocabulary that sounds like comprehension, and a child's version will not let you. Either it lands or it doesn't.

There is a road, built by a man who made it to go somewhere good. At the far end of it is home. Then the ground shakes, the land splits, and there is a ravine across the middle of the road with nothing on the far side but air. The builder cuts a narrow path up into the mountains that comes out where the road was always meant to reach. He signposts it. Almost nobody turns. Eventually he sends his son, who stands in the traffic at the turn-off and is killed there, and after that the path is called the Way.

It worked as a story. It was wrong in four places, and each one turned out to be a place where I had not thought something through.

The first break

My draft said the builder could have mended the road and did not.

That is the natural thing to write and it undoes the whole article. It makes him able and unwilling – which is precisely the picture of God that Romans 2:4 exists to correct. A child hears *he could have fixed it but he didn't* and files it where we all file it: he must not care very much, or he must be angry.

The repair came from the story itself once I stopped and looked at the ground. You cannot build on land that is still moving. Whatever caused the shaking was still down there, and anything laid across the gap would go in after it.

Which is better theology than what I had written, and it is Paul's own sequence. The delay was never reluctance. It was the cause not yet dealt with. That sentence — *you cannot build on ground that is still moving* — is Romans 3:25 in words an eight-year-old can hold, and I did not have it until the story demanded it.

The second break

I had the builder mending the road. Night after night, nobody watching, keeping the surface smooth for people who had no intention of turning.

As an image of forbearance it is defensible. As a piece of storytelling it is dead. A child hears *a nice man looks after the road*, and never feels what *anochē* actually costs — the judgement held back, day after day, by someone entitled to bring it.

What replaced it was one line: **he did not take the turn-off away.** Year after year the cars went past it, and it stayed open.

Nine words, no machinery, and it does what the road-mending was failing to do. And it sets up the son without my having to arrange anything, because when he comes he stands at that same turn-off, in person, where the drivers can see him. The forbearance and the cross become one picture rather than two ideas.

The third break

In my first telling you could see the ravine. The drivers went past the turn-off with the drop visible ahead of them.

Which makes them idiots, and makes the story useless. Nobody drives at a visible cliff. If the danger is in plain sight, refusing to turn is not sin, it is

stupidity, and the piece becomes a story about other people again.

So the turn-off moved. It goes a long way back, at the best stretch of the whole road – wide, smooth, curving away between the hills with the sun on it. You cannot see the ravine from there. You cannot see it from anywhere until you are nearly in it.

Turning is then a matter of trusting someone, not of weighing up what is in front of you. At the only point where you can still turn, nothing ahead looks the least bit wrong, and to turn you would have to take somebody's word for a danger you have no way of checking. Which is the faith of Hebrews 11 exactly – people who went out not knowing where they were going, who saw the thing from a long way off and greeted it as strangers.

And it makes the drivers recognisable instead of foolish. They are not ignoring a cliff. They are declining a word about a cliff, on a road that is going well.

The fourth break

I had the builder put up a sign. One sign.

The correction put the whole Old Testament back into the story. *Signs. Many of them, over many years, in different hands and different words, all saying the same thing.* The law, the prophets, the psalms, the mountain itself – a turning marked and remarked for centuries and driven past every time.

It changes the son's arrival. He is not the second attempt after one failed notice. He comes at the end of a long history of true things ignored, which is Hebrews 1 almost word for word: God spoke in many portions

and many ways by the prophets, and in these last days has spoken by a Son.

And it clarifies what was wrong. The signs were not unclear. They were accurate, and they were refused. Which is why, when the son comes, he does not put up another one.

5

There was a fifth problem, and it was not a break in the story. It was something missing from it.

In every version I wrote, the earthquake had no cause. The ground simply shook. Which left the drivers as people caught up in a disaster that had nothing to do with them, and the builder's son as a rescuer. A good story, and not Romans.

Romans has a *we* in it, and a *me*. Chapter 2 does not let the reader stand clear: *therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges*.

Chapter 3 closes the circle – all have sinned. There are no bystanders in this letter, and a telling of it with bystanders in it is not the same telling.

The obvious fix is to put the earthquake in human hands. Make the split in the land our doing, and the culpability is restored.

Tell a child that the ravine is their fault and you have either crushed them or lost them – and you have handed a particular kind of child, the one whose father is in prison, the very thing I have spent fifteen years arguing against: a cycle they did not start and cannot leave.

The answer, when it came, was not mine. It was one line in conversation:
the choice is staying on the road. The comfort. The self.

That is where Paul actually puts it.

He does not charge the man in chapter 2 with breaking the world. He charges him with presuming on the kindness — with having been given space, over and over, and spending it. The crime is not the ravine. It is the daily decision not to turn, made again every morning, all the way along. Chapter 2 verse 5 names what that does to a person: *because of your hard and impenitent heart*. Nobody is born hard. It happens by repetition. You decline the turning once and it costs you a moment's unease; you decline it a hundred times and the unease stops coming. The capacity to be moved wears out through use, and what is left is a man who can read the sign, understand it perfectly, and feel nothing at all.

Kindness is not the gentle alternative to wrath. It is the harder doctrine of the two.

So the story does not need the drivers to have caused the earthquake. It needs them to be doing, every morning, the same thing that caused it.

And that a child can feel, because the evidence is in their own hands.

Nobody made them keep driving. The big road was comfortable, and the narrow path looked hard, and they liked the car and they liked the speed and they didn't want to give it up.

No cosmic machinery. No inherited guilt. A thing an eight-year-old knows is true about themselves before you have finished the sentence.

It also keeps faith with the one line. A child of a prisoner is answerable for their own driving, like everyone else. Not for the ravine, and not for their father's. That is Ezekiel's ruling, given to a people who were quoting a proverb about their fathers' sour grapes setting the children's teeth on edge: stop saying it. The soul that sins shall die, and every son is handed back his own choice.

6

Here is where it ended up.

THE BUILDER'S ROAD

Once there was a road, and it was beautiful.

The man who built it had made it to go somewhere good. He put it through the hills and over the rivers, and at the far end of it was home. Everyone driving on it was going there. That was what the road was *for*.

Then one day the ground shook.

It shook so hard that the land split open, right across the middle of the road, and when the shaking stopped there was a ravine where the road used to be. A long, deep drop, with the road running straight to the edge of it and nothing on the other side but air.

Now here is the thing nobody understood.

It was his road, and he loved it, and he wanted it mended more than anybody did. But you cannot build a bridge over ground that is still

moving. The thing that shook the land was still down there, and anything he laid across the gap would go in after it.

So he did what could be done. He cut a path up into the mountains — narrow, winding, slow, hard going — and that path came out at exactly the same place the road was always meant to reach.

He put the turn-off a long way back. Right where the road is at its best: wide and smooth and curving away between the hills, with the sun on it.

You cannot see the ravine from there. You cannot see it from anywhere, until you are nearly in it.

That is the difficult part. When you come to the turn-off, there is nothing in front of you that looks the least bit wrong.

So he put up signs. Many of them, over many years, in different hands and different words, all saying the same thing. *Turn here. The bridge is gone. This way home.*

And almost nobody took any notice.

It wasn't that they couldn't read them. They read them. Two things were against it.

The first was that the road ahead looked perfectly fine. Better than fine. You would have to take somebody's word for it that anything was wrong, and the only person saying so was the man whose road it was, who was not there in the car with you.

The second was what turning would cost. The big road was smooth and you could go fast on it. The little path went up, and it was steep, and it looked no fun at all.

So they went past the turn-off thinking: *not yet. Maybe later. I'm fine.*

And that was the choice. Not one big terrible decision. A small one, made again every morning, all the way along.

He did not take the turn-off away.

Year after year the cars went past it, and it stayed open.

A few turned. Not many. They walked the path for years, and they were brave people – but here is a sad thing. Not one of them ever got all the way to the end. They could see it from a long way off. They waved at it. They never arrived.

So then the builder sent his son.

And his son did not put up another sign.

He came down and stood at the turn-off, in the middle of the traffic, where everyone could see him, and he pointed up at the path and would not get out of the way.

They hit him.

It killed him.

And when it did, everyone could suddenly see what the builder was like. He had been like that all along – the turn-off left open, year after year, for people who kept driving past it. Only now you could not miss it. It was standing in the road with its arms out.

Three days later the son got up again.

And something else had happened, down deep, where nobody could see.

The shaking had stopped.

The thing that split the land in the first place – the thing that made it impossible to build anything across the gap – had been dealt with, down there in the dark, while everyone up on the road was watching something else. The ground under the ravine has been still ever since.

Then the son walked the narrow path all the way to the end. The first one ever to finish it. After that people stopped calling it the path and started calling it *the Way*. His way.

It did not get any wider. It is still narrow and it is still hard walking and it still goes up. What changed is that it goes all the way now, and somebody has been along it ahead of you.

The builder has not finished either. One day he is coming back to fill in the ravine and put the land together so there is no split in it at all, and the road and the path will be one road again, going where it always went.

But that day is not here yet. The cars are still coming. And the big road is still smooth, and it is still beautiful, and it still goes to the edge.

So this is what the people who took the path do now.

They go back.

They walk down out of the mountains to the turn-off, where the traffic is loud and nobody is slowing down, and they stand where they can be seen. Not holding signs. Signs never worked.

They stand there themselves, which is harder, and they say the only thing that has ever made anybody brake:

He isn't angry with you. He built this road. He left this turning open for you the whole way along.

Come home.

7

Two things came out of the exercise that I did not put in.

The first is the ending. I did not plan it. Every attempt to finish the story came out the same way: the people who took the path walk back down out of the mountains and stand at the turn-off, where they can be seen, and say the thing. I tried other endings.

Which is Romans 12 to 15, arriving unasked. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies.* A body presented is a person standing somewhere at cost. And it is the repair of the failure Paul named back in chapter 2 – *the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you* – which was a failure of display. Israel was given the self-description and commissioned to show it, and did not. The son showed it himself. Then he handed the job back.

It is also the only thing that has ever worked. Not information. Nobody driving past that turn-off is short of information, and the signs were accurate for centuries. What makes a person brake is another person standing there.

The second is harder, and it is the correction I would want to make to the way the verse is usually preached.

And there is a reason that sentence at the turn-off is harder to hear than it sounds.

An angry God is useful. If he is shouting, you have a grievance, and a grievance is somewhere to stand. Most men I have sat with who would not turn had one — the system, his father, the church, the God he had been told about who was waiting to catch him out. Paul calls this suppressing the truth, and it is the first thing he says about anybody in the letter. We do not reject what is true. We hold it under, because under it is a version we can drive past.

Take the anger away and the grievance has nothing to fasten to. What is left is a turning that was kept open, at somebody's expense, for as long as it has been open — and a driver who went past it every morning because the road was good and the path went up.

So the heralds can say it, and the stakes are not lowered by their saying it. The land is split, the road ends in air, and the end of those who keep driving is not hidden — you can watch it happening. Wrath in this letter is mostly God letting go: *he gave them up*, three times in one chapter, the hand that was holding the car finally opened. The ravine is not a trap laid in the road. It is where the road goes, once nobody is holding you back from it.

Kindness is not the gentle alternative to wrath. It is the harder doctrine of the two.

Wrath leaves you a bystander in your own story. Something is coming, and you need to get out of its way, and whether you deserve it is a question for the theologians. Kindness puts the thing back in your hands.

It says: you have been given space, deliberately, over years, and the only question is what you have done with it. There is no one else to blame for driving past a turn-off that was left open.

And the road stays beautiful. The big road is smooth, and the path is steep, and the drop is not visible from the place where you have to decide. Turn, and you are turning onto something hard, knowing it, on somebody's word.

He isn't angry with you.

That is not the easy sentence. It removes the one excuse anybody ever had.

¹ Scripture is quoted from the ESV throughout.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.