

THE OLIVE TREE OF ROMANS 11

Since we are going to be discussing the New Covenant in Hebrews chapter 8 and following. I think it is a good idea to take a short excursion to the Apostle Paul's teaching of the olive tree metaphor in Romans 11. This is to help with understanding the relation of the New Covenant to us as Gentile Christians, considering the fact, that in Jeremiah 31, repeated in Hebrews 8, it is clear that the LORD said that He would make a new covenant with *the house of Israel and the house of Judah*.

Let's jump in to Romans 11 at verse 13.

13: For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office:

This is Paul's appeal to his apostolic authority. It is to his apostolic authority specifically to the Gentiles, as that is to whom the Lord Jesus sent him. Let's review some things to start:

John 13:20 — *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me."*

This was not the Lord speaking to Paul, as we should know, but was speaking to His disciples before His death. However, it should be understood that it is a blanket statement that the one that is sent by the Lord is going with the authority of the Lord.

Three times in Acts, we read the account of the "Damascus Road" experience, and that the event is spoken of 3 times, it must be very important to the whole story.

- Acts 9:1-16 — Third person narrative of the events
- Acts 22:1-21 — Paul's speaking of the events speaking to the mob in the temple
- Acts 26:9-22 — Paul's speaking of the events in his defense to King Agrippa

All of these speak of the fact that the Lord Jesus sent Paul, and sent him to the Gentiles. The authority of the apostle is a full study in itself, but that should be sufficient for now. What will follow is Paul making it very clear about the authority in which he is speaking.

14: If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.

He wants those that are his kinsmen according to the flesh but have rejected Christ to see what the Gentiles have and want it for themselves.

15: For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?

In 2 Corinthians chapter 5, we have more on this reconciling of the world. *"God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself"* are the words of 5:19. In this we see what is happening here. The riches of what Christ accomplished at Calvary are extended to the whole world. We see this happening in history as the people called by God as a special people to Himself have rejected what was specifically promised to them. See Matthew 1:21 — *"For He shall save His people from their sins"*, and John 1:11 — *"He came unto His own, and His own received Him not."*

To be clear, it is the way that salvation came to the Gentiles that is what is provoking the Israelites to jealousy. The order of prophecy is that the Gentiles would be blessed through Abraham's seed, starting at Genesis 12:3. It has not gone unnoticed that Abraham's specific seed, i.e., Christ, as in Galatians 3, is still the root of blessing, but no honest reading of the Old Testament can say that the multiplied seed are not also in view. The truth is that God would not let the stubbornness of the Israelites in rejecting Christ ("*All day long I have stretched forth my hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people*", Romans 10:21.) stand in the way of His gospel from reaching the Gentiles.

Acts 13:46–47 — "*Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.*"

The second half of verse 15 says something further, and that is that *when* the Israelites are again received, *when* they come back to the LORD that bought them, *when they repent* — it will be like life from the dead. This is something that is seemingly impossible.

Recall Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones:

"Son of man, can these bones live?", verse 3

The people of Israel saw in our Lord's day a living illustration of this when He raised Lazarus from the dead. "*They were dry, very dry*", Ezekiel 37:2.

Compare with John 11:39 — "*he stinketh*"

The impossibility is met with the power of the God who does the impossible. But the Word is clear on the fact that it will happen. We're still living in a time that is in waiting of that.

But Paul continues, speaking of the call:

16: For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches.

This seems to be going back to the call of Abraham, and the fact that the LORD called Abraham and made him holy and that which would grow out of him by natural descent is holy because it grew out of him who was made holy. BUT...

17: And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree;"

The branches have a clear definition, and I don't think anyone has an argument about that. The branches broken off are those that disbelieved in Israel. Remember that as we studied in Hebrews about those that came out of Egypt that did not enter into God's rest because of unbelief, who are also a living picture of those their children who would not enter into God's rest in His Christ who was promised to them as their Savior. Further, we see that God would bless the nations (Gentiles) with His salvation, with or without them. History shows that this blessing through Christ came without them as they judged themselves unworthy of eternal life (Acts 13:46).

So, we see in Romans 11 that Gentiles, as Gentiles, get to partake of that which naturally belongs to Israel. Part of that is the New Covenant as we see explicitly in Jeremiah 31, which is in the blood of Jesus

Christ (Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25), and in fact is in Jesus Christ Himself. He is Himself the New Covenant (Isaiah 42:6-7), as He is the mediator of it (Hebrews 8:6), the surety of it (Hebrews 7:22), and the testator of it (Hebrews 9:16). He is the one that makes the covenant possible in that His blood was shed to ratify it. The “testator” seems to a reference to Him as the sacrifice itself.

“Thou partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree” should make it clear that we are benefiting from it.

18-19: Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in.

God says that the Gentiles are grafted in because of Israel’s unbelief, in the place that the Israelites should be, and it is to provoke them to jealousy to want to be grafted in again. We can see that God will graft them in again if they don’t still abide in unbelief. The warning here is that Gentiles should not boast against the Jews, “We’re better than you”, but to take them as an object lesson, that God deals severely with unbelief, even though He is extremely kind and longsuffering. But the Gentiles should remember that it is not them that brought them into this place of blessing, it is God that brought them into this. Ephesians 1-3 teach this, and we should really get this down in our own minds, as the truth in chapter 2:8-9 say that the work of God’s salvation by grace through faith as His gift of grace came not from the recipient, but from God Himself:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Further, the rest of the chapter is a plain telling of what Paul calls in Galatians 2 “the gospel of the uncircumcision”: Salvation coming to Gentiles who were strangers to the covenants, but are now made nigh by the blood of Christ. God is creating in Christ one new man — not making Gentiles or Christians the new Israel, but making the believing remnant of Israel along with the believers of the Gentiles a whole new thing, a living organism known as the Body of Christ.

The believing Gentiles are then told this:

20-22: Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed that he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee goodness, if thou continue in His goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.

This should be understood as speaking to Gentiles as a whole. We are in Christ by faith, and stand in His place of blessing by faith. The blessing that is upon the world by faith is found only in Christ, and only by faith in Him as the Savior and Lord that died for our sins and rose again. “Thou” as a believing Gentile stand by faith in Him, and if you don’t believe, you don’t stand, any more than the unbelieving Jew who rejected Christ stands. The unbelieving Gentile is as broken off as the unbelieving Jew is.

It seems that this, as well as that which was to Israel, is a generational goodness. With that, notice this as it is to the Romans. This was a Christian assembly, a church, whose collective faith was spoken of throughout the whole world, and it can be inferred that their faith was well spoken of throughout the whole world. What do we think of when we think of “the Roman church” now? Do we think of Italy in general as a bastion of biblical Christianity now?

How about other nations that were at one time considered to be the Christian nations? The UK? The USA? There was a time in these both that their faith was spoken of throughout the whole world. What about now? What about the once biblical Protestant churches that have rejected the Bible? What has become of them?

Moving on...

23-24: And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

The example of the Gentiles being grafted in to God's blessing serves to say how easy it is for God to bring back any Israelite who comes to Jesus Christ to again be a part of God's blessing through Him. In fact, as we continue, there will be a time when all Israel will turn to Him. It seems like an impossibility, but again, we ask the question from Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

The next three verses are also the word of God, and no one should argue with them. They are clear on meaning, just hard to comprehend.

25-27: For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant onto them, when I shall take away their sins.

Pretty plain. Seems impossible since as the prophet Ezekiel saw, the bones are dry, very dry. But this should not be hard for us who also were brought to life from the dead. "And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins", Ephesians 2:1.

Notice the end of that, "My covenant with them when I shall take away their sins." That is the new covenant. It is the covenant that makes the fulfilment of all of the other covenants possible. It is also the covenant that we now get to partake of before the covenant people get it because they put it from them. There is more to it also, as there are land promises in it, which belong to the time when the Covenant people are brought back to life, when the Deliverer comes out of Zion.

We are made part of what God is doing now and made fully partakers of the New Covenant being grafted in by faith into the promises of God. We fear the idea of "Replacement theology", and there is much wrong teaching that comes from applying things that belong to national Israel to ourselves without thinking about what these things apply to. We should not, however, let our caution against this keep us from believing the clear words of Scripture.

The only issue I would have with understanding the New Covenant to ourselves is to think that what we have now is all that there is to it. There will be more, and that unbelieving "dry bones" nation will live again, but it will only be in Christ, *God's Christ*, who is Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Our theological systems are attempts to systematize the things in God's Word to create a coherent structure for understanding it. As I have said previously in several lessons, our theological systems should work from the Bible, not to make the Bible work according to them. We should allow in our

minds for those systems to be corrected, and not timestamped, never to be amended to be better. That is the basic problem with creeds and confessions and such. We all have a creed and a system, whether it is a good one or not is the question. The more important thing would do we believe the Bible?

These systems are models, but not God-inspired.

Let's close with the Apostle Paul's closing of this subject:

Romans 11:33–36 — "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."