

The Call of the Gentiles

Bible Background • ROMANS 11

Printed Text • ROMANS 11:11–24 | Devotional Reading • ROMANS 10:5–13

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson we will: ANALYZE Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree with wild branches; RECOGNIZE the price Jesus paid for all to be justified; and DECIDE ways to walk in humility toward others in light of God’s grace toward us.

In Focus

Adam knew he was the man. On paper, it was easy to see that he really was. He was Harvard-educated, hard working, and handsome. He was the youngest partner at his law firm, a generous donor to several worthy causes, and the proud owner of a black convertible Mercedes thanks to all those billable hours. However, in person, Adam’s arrogance led him to share his high opinion of himself with anyone in his vicinity, including his secretary, Elaine. She was also thirty-six, but unlike Adam, she was new to the law firm. Adam would end his sentences with condescending phrases like, “But, I’m sure you don’t know that, because you didn’t finish college.” When he told her she couldn’t order lunch right because she ordered a baked potato instead of a twice baked potato, Elaine secretly started looking for other positions elsewhere.

One day, Elaine mustered the courage to ask Adam to purchase Girl Scout cookies for her daughter’s troop. His response?

“Why would you think I would buy Girl Scout cookies from your daughter, Elaine?” he hissed. “I only donate to causes that benefit me. What can a bunch of girls hiking through the forest do for me?”

As he swaggered out of the room, Elaine began typing her resignation letter.

Do you know an “Adam”? How does excessive pride in worldly accomplishments contrast to God’s free flowing grace to all believers?

Keep in Mind

“But you must not brag about being grafted in to replace the branches that were broken off. You are just a branch, not the root” (Romans 11:18, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Gentiles ethne (Gk.) — Word for non-Jewish people, foreign nation.

B. Reconcile katalasso (Gk.) — Making peace.

Say It Correctly

Consummation. kahn-suh-MAY-shun.

Gentile. jent-EYEL.

Reconciliation. re-KUHN-si-lee-ay-shuhn.

Severity. suh-VER-i-tee.

KJV

Romans 11:11 I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.
12 Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?
13 For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office:
14 If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.
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?
16 For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches.
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;
18 Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.
19 Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in.
20 Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear:
21 For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.
22 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.
23 And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again.
24 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?

NIV

Romans 11:11 Did God's people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. But he wanted his own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves.
12 Now if the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God's offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it.
13 I am saying all this especially for you Gentiles. God has appointed me as the apostle to the Gentiles. I stress this,
14 for I want somehow to make the people of Israel jealous of what you Gentiles have, so I might save some of them.
15 For since their rejection meant that God offered salvation to the rest of the world, their acceptance will be even more wonderful. It will be life for those who were dead!
16 And since Abraham and the other patriarchs were holy, their descendants will also be holy—just as the entire batch of dough is holy because the portion given as an offering is holy. For if the roots of the tree are holy, the branches will be, too.
17 But some of these branches from Abraham's tree—some of the people of Israel—have been broken off. And you Gentiles, who were branches from a wild olive tree, have been grafted in. So now you also receive the blessing God has promised Abraham and his children, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God's special olive tree.
18 But you must not brag about being grafted in to replace the branches that were broken off. You are just a branch, not the root.
19 "Well," you may say, "those branches were broken off to make room for me."
20 Yes, but remember—those branches were broken off because they didn't believe in Christ, and you are there because you do believe. So don't think highly of yourself, but fear what could happen.
21 For if God did not spare the original branches, he won't spare you either.
22 Notice how God is both kind and severe. He is severe toward those who disobeyed, but kind to you if you continue to trust in his kindness. But if you stop trusting, you also will be cut off.

23 And if the people of Israel turn from their unbelief, they will be grafted in again, for God has the power to graft them back into the tree.

24 You, by nature, were a branch cut from a wild olive tree. So if God was willing to do something contrary to nature by grafting you into his cultivated tree, he will be far more eager to graft the original branches back into the tree where they belong.

The People, Places, and Times

Gentile. This name is given to any ethnic group other than the Jewish race. The Jews looked down upon other races as barbarous and unclean. In the Old Testament, Jews referred to themselves as “God’s chosen people” or “God’s elect.” In the New Testament, however, salvation is offered to Jews and Gentiles alike. The Law (also referred to as the Law of Moses) is the authoritative rule of conduct spelled out in the Ten Commandments and the Pentateuch (the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The Lord revealed this code to Moses on Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 5:1–2). While many of the regulations are ceremonial and procedural in nature, the moral law embodied in the Law of Moses is eternal, unchangeable (Romans 7:7–12), and fulfilled through Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17–18).

How does remembering God’s history with Israel help us be more humble?

Background

Romans 11 caps off the expositional part of Paul’s magnificent summary of the Gospel. Romans 1–11 gives us the skeleton of the Gospel of grace, which then gives the Christian the foundation necessary to understand chapters 12–16, which explain the many ways to apply the knowledge that the Son of God has died to save all those who repent and rest in Him for salvation. In Romans 11, Paul, as the appointed apostle to the Gentiles, focuses specifically on how Jews and Gentiles ought to interact in the light of Christ’s coming, which has reoriented, expanded, and clarified what it means to be God’s chosen people.

While the rejection of Christ by many of His own people (Jews) might suggest to the outsider that God has rejected His people, Paul adamantly rejects this notion, operating from the unassailable conviction that God never retracts His Word or promises. When he writes, “God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew” (v. 2), he repeats the same language of Romans 8 in what has been referred to by theologians as the golden chain of salvation: God’s foreknowledge is intimately linked to His uniting and conforming those people to Christ (Romans 8:29–20). Foreknowledge is not merely a passive recognition of a fact, but rather it is God’s active work of creating a reality. To deny the centrality of the Jews in God’s redemptive plan is to misunderstand that plan. In this chapter, however, Paul delves into the specifics of how that works out.

Is there a promise that God has made in Scripture that seems impossible for you to believe?

At-A-Glance

1. The Jealousy of Israel (Romans 11:11–16)
2. The Meaning of Election (vv. 17–24)

In Depth

1. The Jealousy of Israel (Romans 11:11–16)

The question looming behind this entire chapter is: Why has much of ethnic Israel rejected Christ as their Messiah? Does that mean that Israel is no longer elect? That is the import of Paul’s rhetorical question: “Have

they stumbled that they should fall?” (v. 11). Instead, however, the apostle tells us that his ministry to the Gentiles is for the good of the Jews as well! When they see Gentiles enjoying the benefits of union with Christ, jealousy will lead them back to Christ. Paul’s continuous reasoning (from the lesser to the greater or the “how much more” argument) suggests that somehow, the Lord will work the miracle of the full inclusion of the Jews in question. Theologians have gone back and forth as to what this means, but the end of the chapter suggests that many Jewish people will come to recognize Christ before His return. None of this gives Gentiles a reason to think that they are better than the Jews or “more susceptible to the Gospel” than the Jews. Rather, Paul is unfolding God’s salvific plan for both Jews and Gentiles.

In what ways might the light of your union with Christ bring others to faith? What are some of the visible aspects of a relationship with Christ?

2. The Meaning of Election (vv. 17–24)

In these eight verses, Paul revisits a favorite theme of the book of Romans and the Gospel itself: There is no reason for the Christian to boast in him/herself. Here, the method of explanation is an extended metaphor of an olive tree. Paul makes a statement quite in line with the epistle as a whole: “Do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root but the root that supports you.” Paul is careful to remind those of us who are Gentiles that we are the “wild olive shoots” grafted onto the olive tree. Prophets present the image of an olive tree (Jeremiah 11:16; Hosea 14:6), but it was not a common practice to graft wild olive shoots into cultivated trees. Instead, Paul uses this image to emphasize the unnatural reality of salvation in general and salvation of the Gentiles in particular.

The Old Testament provides the image of the people of God as largely confined to the Jewish people with a few exceptions. But the work of Christ and the subsequent revelation of the Holy Spirit through the apostles reveal to us that the plan extended beyond the Jews to the Gentiles as well. For this reason, Gentiles have no reason to boast. Salvation is not anything that they, in any way, deserved. The root that nourishes and supports them is none other than Christ, the author and finisher of their salvation. To say that we are deserving of salvation is to suggest that Christ needs our support, which is wildly absurd. God is the one who grafts in and who cuts off in the case of unbelief. We remain in our salvation not because of our own merit, but because of our God’s mercy. So Paul says: “Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.”

What events/people/gifts tempt you toward pride or its oft-misunderstood twin, self-pity?

Search the Scriptures

1. Paul encourages us in this passage to “not become proud, but fear.” What does that mean?
2. Attention in this passage is drawn to both God’s kindness and His severity. But Paul tells us elsewhere that both of these characteristics point humans to the same goal: repentance. What is the result of repentance in verse 15?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Think of a time when you were prideful, jealous and/or boastful. What were your thoughts and actions based on? How did others react?
2. How has God “grafted” you into His family— naturally (culturally/ethnically) or supernaturally (by faith)? What has your response been to this reality?

Liberating Lesson

Supersessionism, the idea that the new covenant has replaced the old covenant and rendered it null and void, has manifested itself in many ways, some of which have been violent and anti-Semitic. Christians must reject this way of seeing our faith and relating to Jewish neighbors; for as Paul argues it is not the will of God but the way of pride. Christians must be humble in understanding Judaism because we believe Jesus fulfills the Jewish

covenants and all of the early disciples were Jews who received Jesus as the Messiah. Paul argues as a Jewish believer that Jews should not be prideful in thinking themselves more pleasing to God than non-Jews who have come to the faith. Yet as Christians, we must be driven by the fact that Christ is the identity and root from which we glean spiritual benefit. Salvation is found in Christ alone and for a human being to experience salvation it must be through Christ. The benefits of union with Christ are not confined in the life to come; rather, they permeate our earthly lives as well. The joy of that ought to bleed into our work, conversations, and every aspect of that life.

Application for Activation

All views of personal superiority, whether rooted in class, education, race, or any other factor are examples of pride. In these Scriptures, we have one of many reasons to constantly be on guard against this great enemy. Whenever you are tempted to see yourself as better than someone else, turn your eyes, prayers, and thoughts toward the Cross of Christ, where you are reminded that your gifts and opportunities are not fruits of your unending labor, but rather overflow of God's worship-worthy grace. He is worthy of all praise!

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Romans 11:11–24

In Romans 9:30–10:21 Paul showed that although the Israelites failed to obtain a right relationship with God because of their unbelief, God had not rejected them entirely. He used two examples to prove that God always preserves a faithful remnant, even when the situation seems hopeless (11:1–5). He then goes on to describe the way in which God does His work in the world, by choosing some and rejecting others, so that in the end all nations may receive His blessing (vv. 6–10).

11 I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. 12 Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness?

In verse 11 Paul begins his explanation of how God planned to extend His salvation plan beyond Israel to include the whole world, and then, in the end, to bring Israel in as well. The meaning of the passage is elucidated by noting the contrast between stumbled (Gk. *ptaien*, TAY-en) and fall (Gk. *pesein*, PAY-sen). A person who stumbles may recover himself or herself, or he or she may fall completely. Hence *pesosin* (pay-SO-sen) is used here of a complete and irrevocable fall (cf. Isaiah 24:20). Although the nation Israel had stumbled (9:32) through unbelief, the failure to believe had not led to their absolute ruin—Israel had not stumbled irretrievably. God had a definite purpose in allowing them to stumble. Because of their rejection of the Gospel, salvation had gone out to nations other than Israel (Gk. *ethne*, eth-ne, “Gentiles”). The unbelief of Israel opened the door of opportunity for the nations, and thus God’s purpose in history is being accomplished. God has graciously overruled the Jewish unbelief and turned it to a means of glory for Himself and blessing to the world. Their fall was not the necessary means of the salvation of the Gentiles; certainly the Jews’ unbelief could never produce faith in the Gentiles. Rather, Paul simply makes a case: The Jews, in their rebellion and obstinacy, rejected Jesus Christ and the salvation offered them in His name; the apostles then turned to the Gentiles, and they heard and believed.

The Jews themselves perceived that the Gentiles were to possess similar privileges to those that they, as the peculiar people of God, had enjoyed; they could not bear this notion and put forth all their strength in opposition and persecution. The calling of the Gentiles, which existed in the original purpose of God, became in a certain way accelerated by the unbelief of the Jews, who had forfeited all their privileges and fell from that state of glory and dignity in which they had been long placed. Through their fall (Gk. *to auton paraptomati ow-TAHN par-apt-toe-MA-tee*), literally, “by their false step,” continuing the metaphor of *eptaisan* (ep-TIE-sahn) meaning to stumble, salvation comes to the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy. The phrase “to provoke them to jealousy” is Paul’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 32:21, a passage that had Paul already quoted (Romans 10:19). The attitude of the Jews in rejecting the Gospel led more quickly to its spread and proclamation to the nations (Gentiles). Israel would, in turn, be stirred up to envy when they see the nations enjoying the blessings that they themselves could have had. Although Israel had stumbled, God has purposed that the result of their transgression would ultimately provide the incentive to return, that is “to provoke them to jealousy.” By seeing the Gentiles turn to Christ, the Jews may be moved to jealous desire to receive the blessing of salvation. As such, the salvation of the Gentiles is divinely blessed or purposed for the salvation of the Jews.

Paul expands the thought further and argues that if Israel’s misstep had brought enrichment to the world and their defeat had proved to be such a benefit for the Gentiles, it is unimaginable to think how great would be the result of their restoration. The salvation of the Jews will turn out to the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purpose for all, regardless of race, ethnicity or nation.

13 For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: 14 If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. 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? 16 For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches.

Verses 13–14 constitute a parenthesis. Paul would later resume his argument in verse 15. In verse 13, Paul sought to remind his Gentile audience that his primary concern was about them by reminding them that he was their apostle and, therefore, should not assume that what he was saying had nothing to do with them. Rather, it makes him even more zealous in his work for them. By Paul emphasizing that he was “the apostle to the Gentiles,” Paul was hoping he might stir his countrymen to envy with the result that “some of them” might be saved (v. 14). He would do everything in his power for the salvation of his own people.

Paul returns to the idea of verse 12 in verse 15. If the casting away (Gk. *apobole*, a-pobo-le) of Israel led to reconciliation for the world, what would “the receiving of them” their acceptance (Gk. *proslēmpsis*, pros-lemp-sis) mean but “life from the dead?” Paul believes firmly in the future conversion of the Jews, something he likens to a resurrection from the dead. If so great a benefit has flowed from their being cast away, a greater benefit may be expected when those who have been rejected are now accepted. Paul uses the final resurrection as an expression for all the events accompanying the end times or consummation of the age. The consummation of the age will come only when God is satisfied that His purposes for humanity have been fully achieved.

Paul then mixes metaphors to make his point. He alludes to the firstfruits offering, which required Israel to offer to God the first portion of its grain or dough (Numbers 15:17–21). The cake presented to the Lord consecrated the rest of the batch. Paul writes that if the dough offered as firstfruits was holy, then the entire batch was holy. The holiness of the firstfruits (Gk. *aparchē*, a-par-KAY) ensured that the entire batch would be holy. In this metaphor the “firstfruit” represents the Jewish believers who had accepted Christ (the remnant of verse 5), and the “lump” would be those who would come to believe. The metaphor then changes to a tree with its branches. If the root is holy, so are the branches. In this case the “root” represents the patriarchs (especially Abraham), and the “branches” the nation that follows. The point is that if the patriarchs were holy (and they were), so also were the Jewish people. God’s rejection of the Jewish nation was neither complete (Romans 11:1–10) nor final (11:11–24). Paul seems to apply this double figure to suggest that Jewish Christian converts somehow “sanctify” the unbelieving majority of Israel.

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; 18 Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. 19 Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. 20 Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: 21 For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.

Building on verse 16, Paul presumes that both Jewish and Gentile believers mutually share in (Gk. *synkoinōnos*, sun-koi-no-nos, “partakest”) the extraordinary privilege of being nourished by the graced heritage of Israel. Both partake in the holiness of the patriarchs, the one historical root of the people of God, and in the blessings attached to it. In verses 17–24 Paul uses the figure of grafting olive trees to illustrate how the Gentiles came to share the spiritual blessings of Israel, to warn them that the arrogance of privilege would lead to their being cut off, and to remind them of God’s ability to graft in the natural branches once again should they not persist in unbelief.

Paul’s Gentile readers should not view themselves in any way superior to the former branches. They owed their spiritual relevance to Israel; it was not the other way around. They do not support the root; the root supports them. Believing Gentiles are correct in their understanding that unbelieving Jews were broken off so they could be grafted in. Paul said: “Well, it is true. But do not forget that they were broken off because of unbelief and

your permanence depends upon your continuing faith.” Therefore, Gentile believers were to be on guard and eschew any form of arrogance. After all, if God did not spare the natural branches (Israel), what possible chance was there that He would spare branches grafted in contrary to nature (the Gentiles)? Paul’s point is that the church is not entirely new, nor a replacement of Israel. It is instead the continuation of God’s ancient people. Thus, Paul insists that the church is no place for competition and separation but for community and continuity. Believers—both Jews and Gentiles—live by dependence on God and the ancient traditions of the people of God.

The purpose of the olive tree illustration is to prevent any false sense of security on the part of the Gentiles. While we do not lose our salvation for disobedience, we can lose our inheritance both in this life and the life to come (1 Corinthians 3:11–15). Paul’s point in verse 21 is poignant and clear: If God, in His infinite justice and holiness, could not tolerate sin in the people whom He foreknew, so long loved, cherished, miraculously preserved, and blessed, believers in Christ should take heed lest He also not spare us. Rather we must know and be convinced that the same righteous principle in Him will cause Him to act toward us as He has acted toward the Jews, if we sin as they did—which is where self-sufficiency and self-confidence will soon lead us. We ought, then, to remember the branch to which we were grafted, and the hole of the pit from which He dug us out. We must incessantly and continually depend on God’s free grace, that we may abide in His favor.

22 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. 23 And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. 24 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 exclamation, “Behold therefore the goodness of God!” is frequent among the Jewish writers, when they wish to call attention to particular displays of God’s mercy, especially toward those who are singularly unworthy. The Gentile believers ought to consider that God is both good and severe. “Goodness,” or literally “kindness” (Gk. *chrēstotēs*, *chres-to-tes*) and “severity” (Gk. *apotomia*, *a-po-to-mia*) are aspects of the divine nature. A proper understanding of God must include both His kindness and His sternness. The two qualities must be maintained in balance. God’s sternness is seen in His dealings with unbelieving Israel. He cut them off. God’s kindness is seen in the inclusion into His family of those who at one time were “foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). His kindness to Gentile believers is, of course, contingent upon their continuing to respond to that kindness. A failure in this responsibility will lead to being cut off. There is no security for those who by their lives show that the grafting process of faith was apparent rather than real.

Paul said of Israel that if they did not persist in unbelief they would be grafted back into their own olive tree (v. 23). God certainly had the power to graft them in again. The only thing that stood in Israel’s way was their continuance in unbelief. So, we find that their rejection took place in consequence of their willful obstinacy, but they may return into the fold, the door of which still stands open. God would never overpower their unwillingness to believe and force them back into His family.

Paul does not envision the church as a replacement for Israel, nor of separate Jewish and Gentile churches, but rather a church made up of Jews and Gentiles. The God who was able to bring Gentiles to faith is able to restore unbelieving Israel into the one people of God. If the incorporation of Gentiles into Israel is possible, how much more is the restoration of unbelieving ethnic Israel to the people of God a divine possibility? God is able (v. 23)! Although fallen and degraded, God can, in the course of His providence and mercy, restore them to all their forfeited privileges. This will take place if they do not abide in unbelief, which intimates that God has furnished them with all the power and means necessary for faith, and that they may believe on the Lord Jesus whenever they will. Paul elsewhere explains that the veil now continues on their heart; it is not a veil which God has spread there, but one caused by their own voluntary and obstinate unbelief. If or when they turn to the Lord Jesus, the veil would be taken away (2 Corinthians 3:6–18).

The logic of verse 24 is clear. The fact that God has grafted in the wild olive tree holds out good hope of success in the easier case—the grafting in of the branches that belonged “by nature” to their own olive tree. If God can take a wild olive shoot and graft it into a cultivated olive tree (as he did with the nations), how much easier it would be to graft the natural branches (Israel) back into their parent tree? The strength of Paul’s argument lies in the fact that the process he describes is contrary to nature. It is a process unexpected in horticulture. Paul disarms his critics by acknowledging that he is aware of the unnaturalness of this particular kind of grafting, but this is what God has done (and will do), contrary to nature or not. Ethnic or national identity has no bearing on membership of the people of God. God has grafted wild olive branches into His cultivated tree, and He is certainly able to graft the natural branches in again.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Heritage Keepers
(Romans 9:1–5, 14–17)

TUESDAY

A Light for the Gentiles
(Acts 13:44–49)

WEDNESDAY

Life in Christ Jesus
(Colossians 2:1–10)

THURSDAY

Testimony of God's Grace
(Acts 20:17–24, 32)

FRIDAY

Israel's Rejection Not Final
(Romans 11:1–10)

SATURDAY

All Peoples Saved by Faith
(Romans 11:25–36)

SUNDAY

Salvation of the Gentiles
(Romans 11:11–24)