

The Olive Tree

Romans 11:13—18

Paul, speaking to Israelites about their national loss, has been explaining how God was working with Israel in times past (Romans 9), how He is working with Israel today in this Dispensation of Grace (Romans 10), and how He will work with Israel in the future after the Rapture (Romans 11). The nation of Israel was chosen (elected) by God as the vehicle through whom He would reveal Himself to the world. When they rejected that task, by stoning Stephen (Acts 7), God raised up Paul and introduced the Gospel of Grace to the world. God's plans for the nation of Israel were then put on hold, and now salvation is being offered to Jew and Gentile alike regardless of nationality (Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). This shows that God is not dealing with nations in this Dispensation of Grace, but with individuals. The Jews are currently in a state of "not My people" (Hosea 1:9), meaning that all the promises given to Israel are currently on hold. Individual Israelites can be saved, but the nation is not being dealt with today. Since God is not working with the nation of Israel today, there is no prophecy being fulfilled concerning the nation of Israel.

However, God is preserving the nation of Israel so that He can fulfill all that was promised to the nation of Israel after the Church, the Body of Christ, is caught up to be with the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17). This is when Israel will once again be called "My people" (Hosea 1:10; 2:23), and all the promises given to Israel will be fulfilled just as prophesied. It is very important to understand that the prophecies concerning Israel are not being fulfilled through the church, as many teach today. Those who teach that do not understand how the Bible separates Israel's prophetic program from the Church's Mystery program.

Israel stumbled when they crucified Jesus Christ, and fell when they stoned Stephen. This was a fall from their special position of service. They are no longer the agent through whom God is working to reveal Himself to the world. Instead, the Church is now tasked with spreading the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18—21). Although many mid-Acts teachers and preachers teach that Israel diminished over a 35-year period, through the end of Acts, this idea just confuses God's work with the nation of Israel with Him reaching out to individual Israelites and Gentiles. The diminishing spoken of in Romans 11:12 was a sudden loss of the status given to the nation of Israel by God. Their fall, diminishing and casting away (Romans 12:12,15) are all the same event to the benefit of the world, and to the Gentiles (no real difference between the world and Gentiles). This diminishing, or loss, happened when they fell. However, Paul was given the job of reaching out to individuals with the Gospel of the Grace of God with a special emphasis on reaching individual Israelites up until the end of the book of Acts (Acts 13:46). The nation of Israel did not slowly diminish, but Paul's emphasis toward reaching individual Israelites with the news of a changing dispensation did. No longer will we see Paul making a special effort to reach the Jews after the end of Acts. To say that the nation of Israel was diminishing throughout Acts really confuses the dispensational change that was brought about with Paul's salvation. It was at that point in time when the dividing wall of the Law was torn down so that there was no longer any difference between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14—16). The two groups were made into one new man with the establishment of the new Dispensation of Grace (Ephesians 3:2), which was revealed to Paul as he was commissioned to make all men see what is the fellowship of the Mystery (Ephesians 3:9).

Israel's diminishing can be contrasted with their future increase. At the Second Coming, Israel will be given their special position back and they will be held above all other nations on this earth. Their increasing will happen instantly, not over a period of years, just as their decreasing happened.

The olive tree

The olive tree has been a hot topic of conjecture and theological debate for centuries. Much theological damage has been done simply because many do not properly divide Scripture. This leads to a distorted view of what Paul is trying to teach. Hopefully, with a proper understanding of the last three chapters of Romans, we will be able to cut through commonly misapplied teachings and see what Paul is saying about the olive tree, Israel and the Body of Christ.

Romans 9, 10 and 11 address dispensational changes concerning Israel and their relation to the Church, the Body of Christ and the Gentile world. The olive tree wraps up Paul's teaching directed toward the nation of Israel about dispensational changes in God's program. The tree, therefore, is picturing what was being taught in those three chapters in Romans.

The tree is divided into two components, the root and the branches. The root remains the same even as branches are cut off and grafted in. There are a number of ideas about what the root represents, the most common being the Messiah, Israel, the Church, and Abraham.

Those who claim the root of the olive tree is the Messiah use Isaiah 11:10 as proof. *“And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.”* Connecting the Body of Christ to the Messiah in effect connects the Gentiles to Israel. This is not what happened. Jews and Gentiles were brought together to form a new entity, the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ did not come about by adding Gentiles into Israel, rather by bringing individual Jews and Gentiles together to form the Body of Christ.

Those who define the root as being Israel are doing the same thing as above. Anyone connected to the tree would become spiritual Israel, and therefore be given the blessings that were promised to Israel. The problem with this thinking is that the physical promises given to the nation of Israel are turned into spiritual promises given to the church. Those who embrace this idea do not recognize that God deals with the nation of Israel separately from the Church, the Body of Christ. We are not part of Israel, but were made into a totally new and unique entity (Ephesians 2:15).

Those who think the church represents the olive tree often define the Church in very broad terms. They define the Church as believing Israel, or “true” Israel (believing Gentiles who are now declared to be “My people,” making them the true Israel of God—Galatians 6:16). This would leave open the possibility of losing your salvation because you could be “cut off” from the church. This concept goes against Paul's teaching that we cannot lose our salvation (Romans 8:1; Ephesians 4:30).

I believe the best explanation is to define the root as being Abraham. Abraham actually spans both Jews and Gentiles, by showing that salvation by faith before the Law was given. Since Israel came out of Abraham, Abraham would be considered the root of Israel. Paul alludes to this in verse 17 with Israel as the natural branches attached to their rich root. By implication that rich root would be Abraham (or possibly the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).

We in the church also have a connection to Abraham. Galatians 3:7 says that all who come to God by faith are sons of Abraham. Galatians 3:14 continues by stating that the blessing of Abraham has come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus. We are drawing from the rich root of the olive tree just as the Jews do. This explanation of the root seems to fit better than the other views, and fits with the dispensational changes that Paul was describing concerning Israel in chapters 9, 10 and 11.

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