

### The Olive Tree Branches

#### Romans 11:13—24

The previous lesson concentrated on how the nation of Israel was impacted by their fall, and how Paul used the olive tree illustration to summarize what he had been teaching in Romans 9, 10 and 11. We specifically looked at the root of the olive tree, and came to the understanding that the root represented Abraham. It's easy to understand how Abraham is connected to Israel since he is called the father of Israel. While Isaac and Jacob are also called the fathers of Israel (Exodus 3:15), the leaders of the nation of Israel considered Abraham to be their father (Matthew 3:9; John 8:53). Abraham is not only called the father of Israel, but he is also called the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5).

While Abraham is physically the father of the nation of Israel, he is also the spiritual father of true Israel. Paul describes true Israel as the believing Jews, also called the Little Flock (Luke 12:32; Romans 9:6—8). He is their father because he and they were saved by faith. Going back to Genesis 15:6 we see that Abraham was declared righteous because he believed the Lord. To believe is to have faith. If you have faith, you have believed. Just as Abraham was saved by faith, Israel could only be saved by faith and not by works of the Law (Romans 3:20). They were saved by faith and then needed to do the works of the Law to demonstrate their faith. If they did not do the works, they did not have the faith. If they did the works without faith, as the Pharisees did, then they were not saved. Faith and works were closely connected, but it was faith that saved.

Members of the Body of Christ are also connected to Abraham because we are also saved by faith, with Abraham as our example. Before he was told to add works to his faith, he was justified. However, when he was told to sacrifice Isaac, he needed to add works to prove his faith. When God told him to be circumcised, he became an example to the nation of Israel as to how their salvation worked (James 2:21). Abraham spans both Israel and the Church, the Body of Christ. In other words, Abraham is the father of both Israel (while the Gospel of the Kingdom was being preached), and the Church (while the Gospel of Grace is being preached) (Romans 4:11, 16). He was first an example for us, and then an example for Israel. This is why Abraham is considered the root of the olive tree of Romans 11.

#### The branches

The root of the olive tree is a bit enigmatic, but becomes understandable when the previous chapters of Romans are understood, and we are able to see how Paul connects Abraham to both Israel and the Church, the Body of Christ. The branches are not quite as difficult to understand. It helps greatly to understand that the olive tree is a summary picture of what Paul has been teaching in the previous chapters.

The branches of the olive tree represent groups of people, not individuals. How God uses these groups is explained through the olive tree illustration. As Paul had explained in previous chapters, Israel was the nation through whom God was working. Any Gentile who wanted to come to God needed to come through the nation of Israel. The branches that are on the olive tree to begin with represent the nation of Israel. Paul says that these were natural branches that are connected to Abraham.

Notice that verse 13 indicates that Paul is now speaking directly to the Gentiles about the nation of Israel. It was because Israel had failed in serving God properly that they fell. This fall of Israel meant the Gentiles benefitted because now they are able to come to God individually without going through the nation of Israel. Paul was hoping that Israel might be moved to jealousy and come to believe in Christ when they saw how God was working with the Gentiles, a position that they once held (verse 14).

Paul then says that some of the branches were broken off, and the Gentiles, a wild olive branch, had been grafted into the olive tree. This is exactly what Paul had been teaching in the previous chapters.

The branches that were broken off are unbelieving Israel, those who refused to believe the Gospel of the Kingdom. They can be thought of as apostate Israel. The believing branches remain attached to the olive tree, still connected to the rich root of Abraham (verse 17). These are the believing Kingdom saints who have long since died off and are no longer being used as God's witness to the world.

The wild olive branches, that took the place of the branches that were cut off, are the Gentiles. God removed the nation of Israel as His favored group through whom He would work, and He is now working through the Gentiles. Notice how Paul tells us that he is speaking to the Gentiles in verse 13, and then he says that "you" are a wild olive branch in verse 17. This wild olive branch, that was grafted into the olive tree, is the Gentiles. This is the group that God is now working through in this Dispensation of Grace.

Those who think that the nation of Israel is still God's chosen people do not understand the picture of the olive tree. Neither do they understand that Israel has been declared, "Not my people." Since God is not dealing with the nation of Israel, there can be no prophecy fulfilled today concerning the nation of Israel.

Instead of being proud that we are now chosen to carry out God's plan in this age, we need to remember that we are supported by the root. Since God broke off branches to make it possible for the Gentiles to be grafted in, He is able to break off the grafted branches and graft in the natural branches once again.

This pictures what will happen in the future, and what Paul has been talking about in the past three chapters. Israel was cut off from their place of honor, and the Gentiles were put in their place. Once the Rapture happens, the Gentiles will be cut off from their place of honor, and Israel will once again be the vehicle through whom God works. This has nothing to do with salvation, only about what group God is using to accomplish His plans in reaching the world. The tree illustrates how God changed from the Kingdom program to the Grace program, and also shows how He will eventually close out this current program (Mystery) to finish His program with the Jews (Prophecy). The branches are groups, not individuals.

### **Holy branches**

One phrase that can be misleading is found in verse 16. Paul states that if the first piece of dough is holy, then the whole lump is holy. If the root is holy, then the branches are also holy. This has been taken to mean that anyone attached to the olive tree is saved. This also has been used to show that we can lose our salvation because branches can be cut off. This interpretation is used, at least in part, because of a misunderstanding of the word *holy*.

To be holy means to be set apart. God is holy because He is set apart from everyone and everything. When we are saved, we are holy because we are separated apart from the world and unto God. However, being holy does not necessarily mean being saved. The utensils used in the temple were holy because they were set apart for God's usage, as were the priests (Exodus 40:9—15; Leviticus 8:10—12). Obviously, the vessels in the temple were not saved, but they were set apart, sanctified, made holy, separated for service to God.

In the same way, the groups who were connected to the olive tree were holy because they were set apart for God's purpose. Israel was first set apart, then the unbelievers were broken off to make room for the Gentiles. The Gentiles are now set apart to serve God's purpose. Just as Israel was composed of believers and unbelievers, so too are the Gentiles. Being holy does not mean they were all saved, just that they were separated for God to use.

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