

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part twenty-nine

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WHY WOULD A GOOD GOD BRING SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS TO ISRAEL?

Romans 11:11-18 - "So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. [12] Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will *their full inclusion* mean! [13] Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry [14] in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus *save some of them*. [15] For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? [16] If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. [17] But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, [18] 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"

The meaning of God's dealings with all mankind is covered in this letter. The very first question sets Paul's agenda for this passage - **Romans 11:11** - "So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall?...."

Note the difference in Paul's word play between the two verbs "*stumble*" and "*fall*." To *stumble* is to trip over something (in the case of the Jews, God's plan to save by grace plus nothing). To *fall* is the end *result* of stumbling. Sometimes you stumble temporarily - losing your balance momentarily. But other times you stumble and then *fall*. You land flat on your face. And sometimes you can't get up.

So we can see Paul approaching the second of his two main questions in Romans chapter eleven. The first question - did God reject the Jewish people *partially* or *totally*? - we studied last week. God has rejected the Jewish people *partially*, not *completely*. The key verse stating this fact is **Romans 11:7** - "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened...." The separation is clearly spelled out. There is the *elect* in Israel who have found favor with God, and there is the *rest* of Israel, who have been judged by God.

Now on to Paul's *second* question. Has God rejected the Jewish people *permanently* or *temporarily*? That's what Paul is asking in **verse 11**. Certainly Israel has *stumbled*, but has she *fallen* to the point where she cannot get up? Paul's answer is "No, she has *stumbled*, but has not permanently *fallen*." And then he goes on to explain God's marvelous plan and purpose in the predominant unbelief of Israel and God's resulting judgment on her.

1) **IN HIS WISE FOREKNOWLEDGE GOD HAS USED THE UNBELIEF OF THE JEWS TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILE WORLD**

Romans 11:11-15 - "So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. [12] Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! [13] Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry [14] in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. [15] For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?"

It would be very easy to conclude from God's judgment on Israel that His plan was to write her off *permanently*. Unless God's plan was to *force* salvation on people without a free participation of their will, His only option is to change the way they perceive God's saving plan. The Jews as a whole have spurned and

rejected the idea of God's saving realm being entered into through faith in God's appointed Redeemer, Jesus Christ. To this day, apart from a faithful believing remnant, they despise the idea that all can come to salvation through Christ alone.

How is God to change their stubborn hearts? He will do it through the very act of judgment in which He brought about spiritual blindness to the truth. Amazing as it seems, God will use His own judgment on the Jewish majority to cause the gospel to come to the nations - the Gentiles. In other words, God's appropriate judgment on the Jews will actually **accelerate** the evangelization of the rest of the nations.

But that's not all. Paul has more to say. God will then do something even more amazing. He will use the blessing of the Gentiles to open the eyes of the Jews to what they are missing in Christ Jesus. In other words, God will bring about the change of heart among the Jewish people that **never would have happened** apart from God's judgment on them for their unbelief.

This turning to God will be so striking, and so against all visible odds, that Paul likens it to a **resurrection from the dead** - **Romans 11:15** - "**For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but *life from the dead*?**" Probably Paul has in mind Ezekiel's picture of Israel returning to spiritual life after her long exile into spiritual darkness and unbelief:

Ezekiel 37:7-12 - "**So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. [8] And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. [9] Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." [10] So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. [11] Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel...."**

And then Paul tells us something about a hidden motive behind his entire ministry. He's known as the apostle to the Gentiles. But here, and I think only here, Paul tells us a secret **motive** behind his ministry to the Gentiles. He says he got up in the morning determined to reach as many Gentiles as he could with the gospel, but he did it with one thing in mind - **Romans 11:13-14** - "**Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry [14] in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.**"

Remember, it is essential, if the Jews are, in mass, to become "**jealous**" of the Gentiles, that Gentile Christians display themselves as the **true Israel**. Unless Jews come to actually see Christians as the **true inheritors** of the full covenant blessings of Abraham by faith, they will never become jealous of the Gentiles. They may come, as they do today, to see Gentile Christians as participants in a **different** religion from theirs. In that case there is no reason for them to become jealous.

No. For God's plan to succeed they must come to see the Church as the true participants of the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And this is exactly the way Paul describes the church in all of his letters:

Romans 9:6-8 - "**But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [7] and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [8] This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."**

Galatians 3:7-9 - "**Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. [8] And the**

Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." [9] So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

Galatians 3:13-14 - "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— [14] so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

The church simply *must* understand the implications of these words. Paul preached this message *not* to belittle the Jews, but to *create spiritual jealousy*. Unless the Jews come to see the Church as the true Israel, the true people of God, the full inheritors of the promise of Abraham in a way *ethnic Israel* is not, she will never be reached with the gospel. That's exactly what Paul is saying in our Romans text.

2) TWO PICTURES ILLUSTRATING TWO DIFFERENT TRUTHS

Romans 11:16-18 - "If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. [17] But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, [18] 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."

When Paul compares Israel both to a lump of dough and a tree he isn't just repeating himself. He needs *both* images to tell the whole story of the Jewish people. Both images have a rich history of meaning drawn from the Old Testament.

The picture of the "*dough offered as firstfruits*" comes from **Numbers 15:18-21** - "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land to which I bring you [19] and when you eat of the bread of the land, you shall present a contribution to the Lord. [20] Of the first of your dough you shall present a loaf as a contribution; like a contribution from the threshing floor, so shall you present it. [21] Some of the first of your dough you shall give to the Lord as a contribution throughout your generations."

This offering to the Lord of the "*first of your dough*" was a reminder that *all* of the grain was a gift from the Lord. In offering the firstfruits they were, in a sense, presenting to the Lord *all* of the rest. They were *reminding* themselves God was the giver of grain. They were *turning from their own works* as the ultimate source of their sustenance.

The firstfruits of the Jewish people were the patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their lives, while not perfect, modeled trust and reliance on the promise of God. Paul uses Abraham as a model of faith in God over and over in the book of Romans. This God-ward trust and reliance on God's promise was the heritage of Israel. This was her beginning. This was the *root* of the call on the *whole nation* of Israel. The whole nation was to be bound up and affected by the firstfruit of that original lump of dough - **Romans 11:16a** - "If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump...."

But there was a problem. The people didn't walk in the faith of their forefathers. By the time of Paul's writing to the Romans the Jewish leaders had compiled layer after layer of legalistic laws - none of them found in the Old Testament - and used this system of *works religion* to reject God's appointed Messiah - the *Jewish* Messiah - Jesus Christ.

So Paul needs a second picture - one that would tell the whole story of where Israel was spiritually as He wrote to the Romans. This is where the image of the olive tree, root and branches comes in - **Romans**

11:16b-18 - "...and if the root is holy, so are the branches. [17] But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, [18] 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."

The first picture of the lump of dough shows **solidarity** with the forefathers. The second picture of the tree, root, and branches shows the **separation** between the faithful and those who are unbelieving.

Several ideas are important as we interpret this imagery. First, Israel was repeatedly referred to as an **olive tree** in the Old Testament - **Jeremiah 11:16** - "The Lord once called you 'a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit.' But with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed." Or, in more positive terms, **Hosea 14:6** - "...his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon."

The **root** of this olive tree is the **faith of Abraham and the patriarchs**. This Paul has already stated in **Romans 4:11-13** - "He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, [12] and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. [13] For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith."

But the Jewish branches didn't remain in that root. They rebelled against the idea of faith in divinely revealed grace. They trusted in their ethnic Jewishness rather than in Christ. When Christ came to His own (the Jews) they received Him not. And those branches were, says Paul, "**broken off**." They no longer received the life of the **root of faith** in the promise of God's grace.

This is so important. These broken off branches are still Jews **outwardly**, but not **inwardly**. They are still **ethnic** Jews, but no longer the true **Israel** - **Romans 2:28-29** - "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter...."

Those who trust in Christ - Jew or Gentile - are now the true Israel of God. That is the very term Paul uses to describe the church - "**the Israel of God**." These and these alone are partaking of the life of the **root** of the olive tree - the covenant of Abraham through faith. Again it must be said, only the Messiah - the Jewish Messiah - imparts the life of God to the heart.

This is the true Israel. **From the time of Christ onward to participate in the life of the root of the olive tree - to belong to the covenant of Abraham - and to be joined to Christ in faith through the gospel are exactly the same thing - 1 John 5:12** - "Whoever has the Son has life [that's the life flowing up from the root of the olive tree]; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."

True, Gentiles are branches "**grafted in**" to the olive tree. All the Jewish branches had to do to receive the life of the root was maintain the faith of their ethnic father, Abraham. But they didn't do that, and so were broken off. It is a miracle of grace that Gentiles are invited to place trust in Christ Jesus.

But here's the point, and it's very important. **There is now only one tree. And there is only one root system.** And the only way **any** branch remains in the tree is by faith in the **same** Messiah and the **same** Redeemer. **All religions on earth - including the religion of the Jews - all religions are measured by their allegiance to Jesus Christ, God the Son - John 8:42** - "Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love

me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.”

These are Jesus' clear words to the **Jews**. From the time of Christ onward Jesus is the litmus test of whether or not people are devoted to the true God. If people reject Christ they are cut off from the root of spiritual life - Jew or Gentile. There is no other way to be saved.