
“Grafted, Contrary to Nature”

ROMANS 11:16-24

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AT A GLANCE

When Jesus comes back He's going to stand upon the mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, the same place from which He departed. Christian, Israel matters to God and Israel ought to matter to you. We've been grafted into the olive tree, from which they've been removed, and into which they will be returned. Paul wants us to feel this connection to Israel. It's a good antidote to Gentile pride.

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday evening Iran launched hundreds of attack drones toward Israel. Thankfully very few hit their intended target and as of last report, there were no injuries or fatalities. It was a huge win for the coalition of Israel and her allies, including the United States. Kellye asked me why the United States has always supported Israel. Besides the fact that we have a common military interest in the Middle East and we're strong allies politically, I'm not sure.

But I'll tell you why we should always support Israel: the olive tree. I'm not talking about their rich resources in olive oil. I'm talking about the olive tree of God's people, which includes Jews and it includes Gentiles, grafted, contrary to nature. I'm talking about spiritual heritage and spiritual destiny. I'm talking about the ancestral beginnings of our faith. And I'm talking about the culmination of human history. It's all wrapped up in Israel. It all revolves around Israel.

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ROMANS 11:16-24

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. ¹⁹ Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² 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. ²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

CONSECRATED

Verse 16 If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. The concept of consecrating a harvest or a batch by giving the firstfruits was common. It comes from Numbers 15:17-21, which instructs Israel to offer the first fruits of the grain harvest as an offering. This offering consecrates the rest of the harvest. Using a different metaphor to convey the same thing, the branches take on the nature of the root. If the root is good, the branches will be good. The tree derives its nature from its roots. The firstfruits and the root both refer to Abraham, his faith, and the covenant God made with him.

Because God chose Abraham, an imperfect but faithful man, He has also chosen the people of Israel. Israel is consecrated to God. Israel remains the elect people of God. Paul affirms this interpretation in Romans 11:28-29, *“As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”*

While no individual can presume upon their association with the people of God to be sufficient for eternal life, Paul’s point is that God has not rejected His people. Hold on to that thought.

DO NOT BE ARROGANT TOWARD THE BRANCHES

Verses 17 – 18 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, do not be arrogant toward the branches.

Some of the branches were broken off, that is unbelieving Israel. And now you Gentiles, by nature wild olive branches, are grafted into the olive tree and share in the nourishment. Implication: **do not be arrogant toward the branches** – the Jews. Do not look down on them.

If we know arboriculture, we know Paul is actually insulting us with this metaphor. Wild olive trees bore no olives. They were nuisances, like weeds. Paul’s point is not arboriculture, though. He’s not interested in the science of making olive trees bear fruit. He’s interested in bursting the Gentile’s pride. Gentiles are like branches plucked off an unproductive, good for nothing olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree. That we bear fruit at all is simply by God’s grace!

Do not be arrogant toward the branches, Paul warns. **If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you.** The root is the faith of Abraham and the patriarchs down through the generations; it’s inherently Jewish. I think I can say it’s the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews chapter 11, the *Hebrews Hall of Faith*. The faithful heroes are Hebrew. The giants of the faith were Jews.

The **nourishing root** that supports us is the promise made to Abraham that he and all the nations of the world will be blessed. And how is it that in him all the world is blessed? Through faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This is the nourishing root: faith in the offspring of Abraham. *“...just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 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.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” Galatians 3:6-9*

ONLY BY FAITH

Verses 19 and 20 Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. You might console yourself by saying it was God who did this. He broke the branches off and

He grafted me in. Besides, Israel rejected the offspring of Abraham. Israel made their bed, let them lay in it.

It's tempting to look upon Israel with this contempt. Maybe that's the evangelical temptation. "The Jews killed Jesus; they don't deserve God's blessing." Granted, but are Gentiles any better? Was it not Gentiles who physically and literally scourged Jesus and nailed Him to the cross? Was it not Gentiles who harassed Him, beat Him, and draped Him in purple only to mock Him? Gentiles don't deserve God's blessing any more than Jews.

Nevertheless, while the premise is true that God broke off the branches, here's a reminder: **they were broken off because of unbelief, but you stand fast through faith.** It was not because you and I are somehow better or more deserving than Israel. It's not because he sees in us better character, greater piety, or stronger virtue. It's one simple factor: **faith.** It's always been faith. From Abram to Paul to today, it's always been faith. Israel, by in large, failed to respond the way their patriarchs responded. They tried to establish their own righteousness, thus rejecting the righteousness of God that comes by faith in Jesus.

You and I would do well to remember what and who grafted us into the olive tree. It was God who grafted us in and it was through faith, and nothing else. It is our faith alone that keeps us grafted in. It's not superior intellect. It's not superior obedience. It's not superior morality. It's simple faith that keeps us connected to the nourishing root of the olive tree. And if Israel would come to faith, praise the Lord, they would be grafted back in!

NEITHER WILL HE SPARE YOU

Verses 20 and 21 So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. This ought to have the effect of destroying arrogance and pride and replacing it with humble awe, reverence, and **fear.** It should destroy presumption. It should counter our predisposition of superiority toward Israel. It should replace that with a sense of sadness for them and a sense of humility about ourselves.

It should create in us a holy awe, knowing that we have not earned our place into the olive tree of God's saving promises. Rather, we have been placed there by the sovereign hand of God. And if we lose sight of this, if we grow to presumption, let us fear. Not that we might lose what we had, but that we never had what we thought. *"Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."* 1 Corinthians 10:12

Paul is countering the notion that people associated with the church would fare differently from people associated with Israel given the same conditions of arrogance and faithlessness. If God cut off unbelieving Israel, why would God spare unbelieving Gentiles.

Most commentators agree Paul is speaking to the church corporately, not Christians individually. Just as God cut off apostate Israel, so God will cut off apostate churches. And there are plenty of them. There are churches that deny the authority of scripture, they reject fundamental truths, they even deny the deity and perfection of Jesus. These churches, like the churches at Pergamum and Laodicea in Revelation 2 and 3, will be subject to God's judgment lest they repent.

CONSIDER THE KINDNESS AND SEVERITY OF GOD

Verse 22 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.

God's **kindness** and His **severity** must both be considered in balance. Too much focus on God's kindness leads people into liberality. Too much focus on His severity leads people into legalism. We

enjoy God's kindness because it was through His kindness that we are spared from His severity. Yet, without His severity, evil would never be stopped. Evil is stopped only by force, as every major war attests.

Reflecting on God's kindness toward them and His severity toward Israel would remind them that what they have has been given to them by grace. It would also remind them that falling into presumption, like Israel did, would have devastating consequences. Paul wants everyone to know it is not association with the people of God that guarantees inclusion, but faith.

You can be around faithful people. You can be associated with faithful people. You can even reap some of the blessings of being with them. But unless you have faith, you have nothing. If you have saving faith, you can be sure your faith will continue. Saving faith perseveres.

We will **continue in God's kindness** as long as we continue in faith. For that was the reason the natural branches were cut off, unbelief. Paul is not contradicting himself here. In Romans 8:29-30 he clearly tells us that those whom God foreknew, He predestined, He called, and He also glorified.

In *Philippians 1:6*, Paul says, "*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ.*" Jesus said in *John 10:28*, "*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*" When Jesus saves someone, that person is saved forever.

The warning in verse 23 is not that an individual, genuine Christian might be cut off; that they will lose what they genuinely had. Rather the church that goes apostate will be cut off. People gathering in the name of Jesus, but presuming and arrogant, faithless, and disobedient, these will be cut off.

There is no shortage of apostate churches today. They will be cut off. They who fail to consider the severity of God, who prefer instead the liberal bent of only considering His kindness, will taste the severity of God in judgment.

As will those churches who fail to consider His kindness and think that they attain salvation through works of legalism. They will be cut off. Just as Israel collectively has been cut off, although God has kept a remnant, so too a church is at risk of being cut off if it fails to remain in the faith, considering both the kindness and severity of God. If they fail to remain in the faith, they will be cut off.

You can be part of an organization called a church, experience its blessings and yet not be grafted into the olive tree. You can be associated with the people of God and not be of the people of God. The evidence of one's true, saving faith is not mere association with a church, but persevering in that faith. The New Testament affirms this repeatedly, believers will persevere in the faith. However, we cannot miss the warning against presumption.

REGRAFTED

Verse 23 continues *And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.*

Not only is God able to graft them back in, how much more natural will it be when He does?! After all, the only thing that stands in Israel's way is **unbelief**, not nature. We've been granted contrary to nature. Israel is the natural branch. If they do not continue in their unbelief, if they will come to faith, they will be regrafted into the olive tree. If God can graft a wild branch, He certainly has **power** to regraft a natural branch.

Verse 24 *For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.*

The future of Israel is restoration into the olive tree, the one people of God, made up of Jew and Gentile. Abraham's natural descendants will become his spiritual descendants. Once again, the nation of Israel will enjoy God's covenant promises.

In the meantime, wild olive branches, we would do well to consider the kindness and severity of God. We would do well to think about Israel with humility. And we would do well to fear the Lord. We, the Gentile church, have been **grafted, contrary to nature**. The spiritual blessings we enjoy are blessings promised to Israel. What a shame to lose sight of that reality, to presume upon God's blessings because of some perceived superiority over Israel.

THE PRODIGAL'S BROTHER

The story of the prodigal son seems so apropos here as I close. The prodigal son is everyone who comes to the father in repentance and faith. He is everyone who wakes up one day and recognizes his helpless and hopeless estate and says I know I can go back home. He is everyone who turns around and looks for his heavenly Father for grace and forgiveness. And he is welcomed back inside the home. But the story of the prodigal son is not so much about the prodigal son as it is of the older brother.

The older brother is the son who thinks he's never done anything wrong and he deserves more than "this son of yours," the prodigal son. He is Israel. And at the end of the story, he is left outside the home pouting while there's a grand feast going on inside. The once outsider is restored inside and the once insider is left outside in the dark; invited, but refusing to come in.

Church, we are the prodigal son, Israel is the older brother. We dine at his table while he sits alone in the dark. We need to feel this weight. We need to feel this burden for Israel. Rather than falling into the same sin as Israel, presuming upon God's kindness as if He owes it to us, we ought to fall to our knees before the Lord in fear and awe, in humility and with gratitude, and we ought to plead with Him for the restoration of Israel to its rightful place in the olive tree.

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