

Romans 11 – One Olive Tree

As he has been doing from **chapter 9** onwards, Paul continues to concern himself with the Jewish nation. Remember, he is writing to a very mixed group of followers of Jesus there in Rome and he has already looked at the failure of both Gentiles and Jews to make proper responses to what they each knew about the true and living God (**chapters 1-3**). He writes from his own background as a very strict Jew but very conscious of his commission from the risen Lord Jesus to take the good news to the Gentiles.

These are not 'light' chapters; Paul has struggled to come to grips with God's plan for his own Hebrew heritage and he has already shown the way in which the promises made by the LORD to Abraham are now the inheritance of all who trust in Jesus. He has made some extremely strong statements such as *"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God"* and *"they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel"*.¹

From these and other comments that we have already found in **Romans**, it seems clear that Paul sees two different 'Israels', the natural and the spiritual, and that only believers in Jesus are the true spiritual Israel – whether they are of Jewish or Gentile heritage! The more I read what he writes here, the more I can understand the intense hatred that Paul encountered from Jewish people! He states very clearly that the basic foundations of their status as God's Chosen People – the promises made to Abraham – have now been opened out to everyone who trusts in Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One ('Christos'). No wonder he writes about making them jealous (**v.11 & 14**) – what they have always seen as their exclusive right has been given away to Gentiles! Perhaps we can even better understand the antagonism he encountered from unbelieving Jews (e.g. in Iconium, **Acts 14**) and the drive by some Jewish believers in Jesus to make Gentile believers also embrace Judaism (**Acts 15** and the whole book of **Galatians**!).

The very natural question is, 'Has God rejected Israel?', and Paul's response is a robust 'No!' (**v.1-2**). He has already made it clear that God says: *"all day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people"* (**Romans 10:21** quoting **Isaiah 65:2**). The fact that God has not rejected Israel is underlined by the fact that there is a believing remnant, just like there was in the days of Elijah (**v.2-4**). This remnant, says Paul, is *"according to God's gracious choice"* (**v.5**) or *"a remnant chosen by grace"* (NIV) and, if by grace, then not by works. *"No longer from works"*, he says (**v.6**), emphasising again that the Old Covenant approach – *"Do this and you will live"*² – no longer applies. So, for this remnant of Jewish believers, legalistic Judaism now gives way to the grace of God.³ There is no other way.

¹ **Romans 2:28-29 & Romans 9:6**

² See **Luke 10:28**, where the Lord Jesus quotes **Leviticus 18:5** and **Ezekiel 20:11**

³ See the wonderful prophecy in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**, quoted in **Hebrews 8:8-12**

So, says Paul, natural Israel has not obtained what it is looking for;¹ only those selected according to grace obtained it and the rest were hardened. Grim news, and he quotes **Deuteronomy 29:4**, and **Psalms 69:22-23** to back it up (**v.7-10**).

BUT, he makes it clear that this hardening is not something that was forced on them by God. Rather, it is a direct result of their own 'falling'/'transgression'/'wrongdoing' and this has opened up salvation to all the other nations (**v.11**).² Not surprisingly, this sparks jealousy among Jews – the intense desire to hold onto what they regard as their own property.

V.12 - 15: Paul longs that as many as possible of his fellow Jews will come to trust in Jesus, and hopes that the ministry which God has given him among Gentiles will stir jealousy among his fellow Jews, to bring them to that point. And, as he says, if their 'falling aside' from faith has produced so much spiritual benefit for the Gentiles, how much better it will be when Jews come to their 'fulfilment', inheriting all the promises of God fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ! As he puts it so graphically: their rejection has resulted in reconciliation for the whole world; their acceptance will result in life from the dead!

In **v.16**, Paul refers back to the practice (under the Old Covenant) of offering the first piece of dough to the LORD³ and links it to the illustration of an olive tree which he is about to use⁴. Just as the whole lump of the dough was holy because the 'firstfruits' had been offered to the LORD, so the whole olive tree is holy because the root is holy.

In this next passage (**v.17-24**), he is writing specifically to the Gentiles among the believers there in Rome (see **v.13**) and describes how some of the original 'branches' who used to be attached to the root (Jews) have now been broken off because of their unbelief, but others from a 'wild olive' (Gentile believers) have now been grafted in among those original branches which have remained attached. **There is only one 'olive tree'!** Jews who have believed in the Lord Jesus straight away have never been detached and Gentiles who have believed are grafted in together with them. Either Jew or Gentile who disbelieves can be cut off, and those who disbelieve can be grafted back in. As Paul says, "*Behold then the kindness and severity of God*"! (**v.22**).

So what is the 'rich root of the olive tree'? (Literally, 'the root of the fatness'). If it was possible for Jews to be broken off because of unbelief, they must have been attached before that. So what had they been they attached to? – The covenant relationship with the LORD, initiated with Abraham and continuing down through the

¹ **Romans 9:31**

² The three words 'stumble', 'fall' and 'transgression' used in this verse are closely linked. The last one means 'to fall to the side' and is the word used in **Ephesians 2:1** and **Colossians 2:13**

³ For examples, see **Numbers 15:18-21**, **Nehemiah 10:37** & **Ezekiel 44:30**.

⁴ In **Jeremiah 11:16-17**, the LORD calls Israel and Judah 'a green olive tree' but speaks of judgment against it and its branches being worthless. See also **Psalms 52:8** & **128:3**. In the Old Testament, the olive tree is a frequently-used image of fruitfulness and the LORD's blessing

generations! Paul has already described in earlier chapters how believing Gentiles have now been included in the promises to Abraham and have effectively become 'Jews' themselves through their faith in Jesus. In this passage, we can see the other side: Jews who refuse to believe in Jesus have been broken off or cut off from that 'rich root'.

As Paul emphasises again, that serves as a warning to **any** believer, especially Gentiles. 'Jews were **not** broken off in order to make room for you Gentile believers' (as **v.19** suggests). Paul clears that one up immediately! 'They were broken off for no other reason than their unbelief, and faith is the only basis on which you Gentiles have been grafted in. So don't become conceited!'

V.25-32 It's important to understand this 'mystery' – how some of those who had formerly been God's chosen people now find themselves cut off from relationship with him. And a key word is 'some'! As Paul writes, "*a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in.*" (**v.25**) At the time when Paul is writing (maybe about AD 56), a large proportion of believers – maybe a majority – would still be from Jewish roots. It's a 'partial hardening' simply because not **all** Jews have refused to believe in Jesus as their Messiah, and the 'fulness' of the Gentiles simply means 'the complete filling up', just like it means the same in other places where the same word is used (e.g. **Colossians 1:19, 2:9** – and many more).

"*And so all Israel shall be saved*" in **v.26** could be controversial! The word translated 'so' (Greek *houtōs*) apparently means 'in this way' and not 'as a result', or 'then', or 'to this degree'. The same word is used in the well-known verse **John 3:16** : "*for God in this way loved the world . . .*" (I understand that, when the Authorised (King James) Version was translated in 1611, 'so' always meant 'in this way', and the other meanings have been added in later English usage.)

What does Paul mean here? Does he mean that **all natural descendants of Abraham will be saved**, or does he mean that, by the 'fulness of the Gentiles' coming in, in this way **all spiritual descendants of Abraham will be saved** – ? Now that I have understood the correct meaning of the word translated 'so', I am more convinced by the second alternative. The suggestion that all natural descendants of Abraham will be saved does not seem to follow on from what Paul has been writing just before this verse, and of course we know that there have been many generations of Jews since the time of this letter to the Roman believers, and the vast majority of them have **not** been saved through faith in Jesus. Or could 'all Israel' have another, different meaning? I am not going to be dogmatic about it, but the true meaning of *houtōs* has certainly clarified my own understanding!

He quotes **Isaiah 59:20-21** in **v.26**. If you look that up in your Bible, you will see that there are some differences, but Paul was quoting directly from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the 'Septuagint'), which would have been the version which the believers in Rome would have had and been able to read. Hardly any of them would have been able to read the original Hebrew! Are the differences significant?

V.27 is a quote from **Jeremiah 31:31-34** which is quoted again in **Hebrews 8:8-12**. A very clear expression of God's new covenant relationship with spiritual Israel! Verses that we are only too happy to claim for ourselves, although originally addressed to 'the house of Israel and the house of Judah'!

There is an apparent contradiction in **v.28**. On the one hand, natural (unbelieving) Israelites are enemies according to the gospel. On the other, they are on the receiving end of God's love because of 'the fathers' (i.e. Abraham and the other Jewish patriarchs with right relationships with God).

"For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (**v.28**). God has never changed his mind about his promises to Abraham (and never will) but, as we have seen many times already, those promises have been opened out to all who trust in Jesus. Nonetheless, Paul says, 'for the sake of the fathers' God's love is still extended to the Jewish people, in spite of their current 'disobedience'.

Those words 'disobedient' and 'disobedience' in **v.30,31 & 32** carry the meaning of wilful refusal to be convinced. Because Jewish people in general refused to accept the witness of the early church in Jerusalem and started 'a great persecution against the church' immediately after they had killed Stephen, the gospel was effectively **forced out** of Jerusalem and was taken to Gentiles (see **Acts 6:8-8:2**). To Samaria and to an Ethiopian (**Acts 6**), to Damascus (**Acts 9:2**), to the Roman centurion Cornelius with his relatives and close friends (**Acts 10**) and to Antioch (**Acts 11**). Paul, of course, was intimately involved with parts of this, and extended the process out from Antioch to Turkey, Greece and Macedonia – and ultimately to Rome itself!

This little bit of history may go some way to explain what Paul means when he writes: *"you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience"* (**v.30**). In the same way, he says, those who earlier wilfully rejected the good news are now also being shown mercy (**v.31**). This underlines again what Paul wrote in **v.1 & 2**: God has certainly NOT rejected his people!

Once again, he emphasises that everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – is on the same footing before God: locked up in wilful rejection of the message and yet still being shown God's mercy (**v.32**).

Has this chapter seemed difficult to understand? Have we found it hard to sort out the difference between God's sovereignty and our freedom to reject his mercy offered to us? Have we fully 'got our heads around' the way that the people of natural Israel fit in – or not – to God's plan of salvation in the the Lord Jesus Christ?

Probably not! But even Paul himself seems to 'boggle' at the intricacies of it all as he writes the last four verses (**v.33-36**). He has tried to explain as best he can, but he knows that, in the end, God's ways and judgments cannot be fully explored and are past finding out completely. He quotes **Isaiah 40:13** ¹ to show this ², and **Job**

¹ The whole passage, **Isaiah 40:12-31** graphically expresses the transcendence of God.

² He quotes **Isaiah 40:13** again in **1 Corinthians 2:16**, but after a short passage (**1 Corinthians 2:6-15**) in which he shows that we have received the Holy Spirit, who searches 'the depths of God', *'so that we may know the things freely given to us by*