

ROMANS – LIVING BY FAITH
GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY & MAN’S RESPONSIBILITY – Chapters 9-11

LESSON 40 – THE OLIVE TREE – Romans 11:17-24

Taking things for granted is a temptation everyone faces. But when the blessings you’ve received were given 2000 years ago, the temptation is even greater. If Christians ever lose sight of the basis for their blessings from God, it’s time to heed the warnings of Paul.

Up to this point, Paul has been specifically addressing the Jews but in this section of chapter 11, Paul focuses in on the Gentiles. He warns against presumption and pride, telling us that we are the invited guests into the blessings of Israel. Our Savior was a Jew, the Bible was written mostly by Jews and our entire spiritual heritage has its roots in Judaism. There is no room for spiritual arrogance on the part of the Gentiles.

The olive tree that Paul mentions here represents the Jews and the branches that are grafted into the tree represent the Gentiles. Because our salvation is all by mercy and grace, it leaves no room for boasting on our part.

Warning Against Boasting

In verses 17 and 18, the branches broken off are the Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Jesus actually warned them about this occasions...

Matthew 21:43, “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

John 1:11 tells us, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

The point regarding boasting is that since we have been grafted into the root of Israel’s faith, there is no room for it. Gentile Christians all over the world have been guilty of looking down on the Jews as if they are somehow better.

In Romans 4:11-12, Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous and was the father of faith not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well. He said in Galatians 3:7 that anyone with faith in Christ...Jew or Gentile...is a child of Abraham. Gentiles should not look at themselves as self-sufficient in regard to faith. We had no faith until we were invited by God to partake of the faith of Abraham.

Warning Against Pride

Beginning in verse 19, Paul says that the Gentiles might be tempted to think that the Jews were broken off so the Gentiles could be grafted in. In other words, God preferred the Gentiles over the Jews so He broke off the Jewish branches to make room for the Gentiles.

The Jews were not broken off because God preferred the Gentiles over them. They were broken off because of their unbelief and rejection of Jesus. Paul makes this plain so there will be no temptation for the Gentiles to feel prideful about their place in God’s plan compared to the Jews.

The inclusion of the Gentiles had nothing to do with preference and everything to do with belief. God excluded the Jews because of unbelief and will do the same to the Gentiles if they chose not to believe.

Warning Against Presumption

Paul's third warning is the most detailed of all. He covers the whole range of God's plan with Jews and Gentiles in just a few verses. The entire olive tree was originally all of Israel...from its root to its fruit. The branches (Jews) rejected Jesus so they were broken off and the wild olive branches (Gentiles) were grafted into the cultivated tree. Paul goes on to say that the natural branches (Jews) will be grafted back in one day.

In verse 24, Paul describes this as "contrary to nature." He says that God has taken the wild branches and grafted them onto the cultivated tree...the opposite of how it was normally done. Essentially Paul is saying that God did something that can't be done unless He is the One doing it. Normally, if you graft wild branches onto a cultivated tree, the wild will dominate and take control. In this case, the opposite happened. The Gentiles were grafted in and made to bear spiritual fruit.

Paul's whole point is this... If God did something contrary to nature by grafting in the wild branches (Gentiles) and making them fruitful, how much more successful will God be one day when he grafts back in the cultivated branches (Jews)?

Paul goes on to say that in the future, God is going to take dead branches that have been laying around for 2000 years and graft them back into the tree and they're going to live. How is God going to do this with the Jews...bring back life to dead branches after such a long period of time?

The answer is actually found in Ezekiel 37 where Ezekiel is told by God to go to the valley of dry bones and preach to the bones. When he started to preach, the bones began to move and come together and muscle and flesh began to cover them. Ezekiel 37:10 tells us, "They came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. The rest of that passage goes on to say that what Ezekiel was seeing was the restoration of Israel.

If God can cause dead bones to live again, surely He can make the dead branches live again and produce fruit...especially when the bones and branches represent the same group of people. The same thing God did for the Gentiles who were spiritually dead, He will do for the Jews who are spiritually dead.

The importance of all this is that from the beginning, God has been in control. He knows what He has done in the past and He knows what He is going to do in the future. The Jews are still part of God's master plan contrary to those who think God has written them off.

To finish out this lesson, Paul gives us a couple of words from which we can make some application...

Words To Believers

The Necessity of Faith – The Bible says we are saved by faith, purified by faith and that we live by faith, stand by faith and walk by faith. Faith makes up the very core of our relationship with God. The Jews were cut off because of their lack of faith and it is by faith the Gentiles receive the blessing of being grafted into the olive tree of Abraham.

The Necessity of Fear – As we've discussed many times before, the fear of the Lord is awe, honor and respect for God that produces in us the desire to obey Him.

Psalm 130:4 gives us a perfect description of this. "But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you." As Christians, having the proper fear of God is the beginning of the wisdom that will keep us faithful to Him.