



## *When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do*

### *“The Wild, Wild Graft”*

Romans 11:11-24

It is widely understood that the reformer, Martin Luther, was powerfully affected by his reading of the Book of Romans. He once wrote,

This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.

Sadly, for all his reading of Romans, Luther never ‘tasted’ the importance of Paul’s comments regarding the future of the nation of Israel. Luther wrote,

For such ruthless wrath of God is sufficient evidence that they [i.e., the Jewish people] assuredly have erred and gone astray. Even a child can comprehend this. For one dare not regard God as so cruel that he would punish his own people so long, so terrible, so unmercifully... Therefore this work of wrath is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God.<sup>1</sup>

Is the nation of Israel “no longer [God’s] people”? We’ll let the apostle Paul answer that for us.

Romans 11:11 I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles.

The tense of the verb “fall” and its contrast with the verb translated “stumbled” implies the idea of falling beyond recovery. A paraphrase might read, “Has her stumble caused Israel to fall beyond recovery? Certainly not!”

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<sup>1</sup> “On the Jews and Their Lies,” Trans. Martin H. Bertram, in Luther’s Works [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], p. 265

They stumbled and fell on the stumblingblock, Jesus Christ. They refused to recognize and receive Him as their promised Messiah and the Savior of the world. He just wasn't what they wanted or thought they needed.

God thus interrupted His dealings with the nation of Israel and "salvation has come to the Gentiles." By "Gentiles" he meant all the non-Jewish nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues anywhere on planet earth during the current age in which we are living.

We call it the Church Age. It spans the time between Israel's rejection of Jesus and His return to resurrect and rapture all the believers during this period. The church was a mystery not revealed in the Old Testament. It is to be kept distinct from the nation of Israel and from the Gentiles.

The Gospel was being preached to everyone and many Gentiles were getting saved. The saved Gentiles were receiving the fullness of the indwelling Holy Spirit and enjoying direct access to God's throne of grace and mercy. Saved Gentiles have all spiritual blessings in heavenly places.

### **It's enough to make an Israelite jealous!**

Romans 11:12 Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!

The word "failure" means *to diminish*. It's another way of saying that because of her fall, having rejected Jesus, Israel is currently diminished, or as we like to say, set-aside.

Now to anyone who thinks God is through with Israel as a distinct group, this verse demolishes that thought. Saved Jews and Saved Gentiles were already enjoying "fullness" in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This verse is saying that one day, in the future, the nation of Israel will experience God's fullness as well. It presupposes Israel is treated separately, distinctly, from Gentiles and from the church.

Romans 11:13 For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,

Romans 11:14 if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them.

Have you ever tried to provoke someone to jealousy by using someone else? It's not very cool.

God, however, is 'cool,' if I can say that. A result of ministering to Gentiles was that Jews were "provoke[d] to jealousy," and individual Jews were being saved, but that didn't minimize God's love for the Gentiles. He wasn't just using them!

Paul made it clear that his ministry to the Gentiles was ordained by God. He was an "apostle" and in his service he magnified his ministry, taking it very seriously.

Romans 11:15 For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

The nation "fell," was diminished, and now we read they were "cast away." Their "fall" is not final so neither is their being "cast away." Besides, in the same breath Paul indicated that Israel will be accepted and be alive from the dead.

What is "the reconciling of the world?" It is the doctrine that the death of Jesus Christ has reconciled God to mankind making us savable. The *Moody Handbook of Theology* defines reconciliation this way: "God removes the barrier of sin, producing peace and enabling man to be saved."

There are two parts to reconciliation:

1. The objective aspect of reconciliation is that in which man is reconciled to God prior to faith and is rendered savable.
2. The subjective aspect of reconciliation is that in which man is reconciled to God when he believes... God is the one who initiated this reconciliation... [it] has been provided for the whole world, but it is effective only when it is received by personal faith.

Here is a homespun, but informative, way of understanding what it means. At first God and man stood face to face with each other. In sinning, Adam turned his back upon God. Then God turned His back upon Adam. Jesus

dying on the Cross “made Him to be sin for us” (Second Corinthians 5:21). It satisfies the demands of God and makes it possible for God to again turn His face toward man. Thus God has reconciled the world to Himself and human beings are entreated by the Gospel to turn from their sin, be saved, and enjoy the face to face reconciliation provided in Jesus Christ.

If something as wonderful as the Gospel spreading out to the Gentile world resulted from Israel’s rejection, *how much greater will be the result of Israel’s eventual restoration!*

Paul was a master at metaphor. The two he next employed were the “lump” and the “branches.”

Romans 11:16 For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

The “firstfruit” and the “lump” are describing dough, not fruit. In the Old Testament Book of Numbers God instructed Israel to take “a cake from the first of [their] ground meal and present it as an offering” (15:20) after they entered the land of Canaan and reaped their first wheat harvest. This offering was to be repeated each year at their harvests. The cake made from the first ground meal of the wheat harvest was “holy,” meaning it was set apart for God.

Paul’s point was that if the cake made from the first wheat harvested was set apart, then all the cakes made from the harvest are to be considered set apart to the Lord.

Paul was not saying that individual Jews are all automatically saved. That would contradict everything he has taught in Romans and elsewhere. He is saying that the nation of Israel belongs to Him, it is set apart for His purposes and use, because of His covenants with Abraham and the other patriarchs who were like the “firstfruits.” The nation of Israel is the “lump” and remains set apart for the Lord - even though currently they are set-aside!

The “root” of a tree is the source of nutritious sap necessary for its growth. If it is sound, pure, and vigorous, we expect the same of the “branches.”

Abraham and the other patriarchs to whom God made unconditional promises are the root and Israel the branches.

Both metaphors establish that Israel is permanently set apart for God. Next Paul expanded on the root and branches to try to describe what God is doing *to* and *through* Israel in the Church Age.

Romans 11:17 And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree,

The “branches broken off” refer to unbelieving Jews. They remain the physical descendants of Abraham, but are not his spiritual descendants.

Part of God’s promises to Abraham was that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed. Gentiles are compared to a “wild olive tree” that was “grafted” to the root.

Look at it this way. God hasn’t uprooted Israel and planted a new tree in her place. No, Israel remains set apart even though set aside and Gentiles are grafted in to the promises He made to Abraham.

Romans 11:18 do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.

Gentiles are indebted to the nation of Israel! Salvation is of the Jews and we are late-comers. We should not, therefore, “boast” of any superiority.

Romans 11:19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in."  
Romans 11:20 Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear.

In verse twenty, “well said” simply means, “it’s true branches were broken off that [Gentiles] might be grafted in.” **BUT** they weren’t broken off for that purpose. God didn’t set Israel aside because Gentiles were superior, or so that Gentiles would totally replace Israel.

No, Israel was “broken off” because of their “unbelief.” **Then** Gentiles were offered the Gospel without the need to first (or afterward) convert to Judaism.

Our response, “faith,” is not a work and has no merit. It is all of grace that we are saved.

Do you understand how ridiculous anti-semitism is? We owe the Jews a great spiritual debt.

Romans 11:21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.

This sounds scary. Let’s think about it in context. Israel was the “natural branches.” Those Israelites who remained in unbelief were broken off.

Gentile nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues are now grafted branches. The Gospel has gone, and is going out, to them. Those who remain in unbelief will be broken off.

This metaphor is about you as an individual only insofar as it pertains to your response to the Gospel. You might say it’s about salvation and not about sanctification.

William MacDonald says,

It must be constantly borne in mind that Paul is not speaking of the church or of individual believers. He is speaking about the Gentiles as [a group]. Nothing can ever separate the Body of Christ from the Head, and nothing can separate a believer from the love of God...

Any person in either group, Jew or Gentile, may believe and be saved **or** they may remain in unbelief and be lost.

Keep that in mind as we read the next few verses.

Romans 11:22 Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

Who were “those who fell?” The nation of Israel in their rejection of Jesus. God’s severe discipline upon them resulted in His “goodness” being shown to all the Gentile nations, peoples, tribes and tongues of the earth.

What about the warning, “if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.” Is this teaching that I, as an individual believer, must “continue in His goodness” or I will forfeit salvation?

Let’s unpack this a little. First let’s ask, what is meant by “the goodness... of God?” Well, in the context of these verses, the “goodness... of God” refers to His turning to the Gentiles with the offer of salvation.

One thing for sure Paul was saying is that God could just as well set aside any particular Gentile nation, people, tribe, or tongue. In other words, this verse might have a group application more than an individual one.

Before you think this is a far-fetched explanation of a difficult text, consider the fact that *we think this way regarding our own nation!* Do we not believe that God has been extraordinarily “good” to the United States? Do we not believe we are “one nation, under God?” And don’t we as Christians within this nation also believe that without revival God will remove His favor from us? If He hasn’t begun to do so already!

The truth is, our nation is *not* continuing in the goodness of God as a nation and we **do** believe it is having severe consequences.

I don’t think these verses, in this context, are about individual perseverance to the end in order to maintain salvation.

One more reason to think that. Paul said earlier, “I speak to you Gentiles” (v13). He was not really addressing the church, was he? No, he was talking to the Gentile world at large about their privilege to hear and respond favorably to the Gospel in light of God setting aside Israel.

Romans 11:23 And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.

Israel will be “grafted [back] in, for God is able to graft them in again.” The condition for which Israel was broken off and cast away was “unbelief.” The condition for Israel to be grafted back in is to “not continue in unbelief.”

We see this happen at the end of the Great Tribulation, as the Second Coming of Jesus to the earth.

Romans 11:24 For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

It is easier to graft natural branches than wild ones. **It should come as no surprise, then, that God will one day save Israel.**