

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 27, Chapter 11 continued

Every now and then a lesson comes along that compels me to preach as much as I teach; this is one of those. Paul has spent the first 12 verses of Romans chapter 11 summarizing some significant theological principles he has been carefully constructing since chapter 1. His first theological principle is that despite the high level of sinning and lack of faithfulness that has been demonstrated by Israel (and is obvious to any observer) oddly enough God has **not** cast aside or rejected the Jewish people as His chosen elect as we might imagine He would. This bogus claim of some Christian denominations that God has rejected His people Israel is what has led to the rampant anti-Semitism that has been present for centuries. It is the German Lutheran Church that has led the way in modern times by claiming that God's justification for abandoning His Old Testament people the Hebrews, and bringing onboard (as a replacement) a new and different people in the New Testament (gentile Christians) is that the Jews killed Jesus.

While anyone who has read the Gospels can rightfully complain that many Jews, especially the Jewish religious leadership, were complicit in Yeshua's execution, it was gentile Romans who actually whipped Him, nailed Him to a wooden cross, and brutally executed Him. Nonetheless, whoever wins that ongoing debate over who is most responsible for killing Christ achieves nothing because both sides are arguing about a red herring. Paul has been explaining that what the Jews (the Hebrews) have done (good or bad) in the recent or ancient past has no bearing on the special status God holds for them. How can this be? Because God made His promise to Israel, going all the way back to Abraham many centuries before there was an Israel, that they are His elect based on His grace and mercy and not based on Israel's merit or their faithfulness. Whether the Jews bear the full weight of Christ's death, or partial responsibility or none is completely irrelevant; it plays no role in God's decision to maintain His acceptance of them as His chosen people.

The second theological principle Paul has elucidated is that those Jews whose hearts became stone-like against accepting Yeshua as their Messiah and Lord experienced that hardening partly because of their own choice to behave wickedly and unfaithfully, and partly because of a choice by God that affected their minds and thus prevented them from accepting Christ. In fact Paul pointed out that a kind of divine intervention, which included hardening of hearts, was nothing new and uses Deuteronomy 29 to prove it. Then he uses the Prophet Isaiah to point out that it was prophesied that this pattern of God hardening rebellious hearts for His own purposes would continue. Thus it ought to come as no surprise to anyone that in Paul's day God would harden the hearts of some Jews who were refusing to accept Yeshua as their Messiah. I want to say this a little differently: Paul is saying to Jews and gentiles in Rome that God hardening even His own people is NOT only a thing of the distant past of Israel's history, as in Moses's day 13 centuries earlier; but such a divine hardening in fact remains as an active tool in God's tool box. The proof of it is all those Jews who refused to trust in their Messiah who have had their hearts hardened by God in response.

If you are paying attention to what Paul is saying then such a claim is pretty sobering. Under certain circumstances God hardens gentile hearts (as with Pharaoh) and He hardens Jewish hearts (as with the non-Believing Jews of New Testament times). I don't know about you, but this is a characteristic of God that I'm not especially fond of. I of course accept that it is His choice and He is sovereign to do as He wills it; but that doesn't mean I have to be comfortable with it. This is where various and competing theological doctrines with names like predestination and predetermination stand in opposition to other theological doctrines with names such as prescience and free will. And of course, as humans do, unyielding stances are taken on both sides of the issue. Whereas over the past several centuries predestination and predetermination have dominated Christian theology especially in Europe, in more modern times free will and prescience (that is, God pre-knows what we're each going to do or choose) have gained steam because Westerners just don't like an attribute of God that takes our individual destiny out of our own hands. So the goal of the one side is to make God into a stern and rigid taskmaster who, like a typical European Monarch, uses humans as little more than disposable pawns in a cosmic chess match; while the goal of the other side is to make God more like a congenial and cooperative genie in the bottle who is there to make our wishes and dreams come true if only we'll approach Him correctly. Paul leaves such a matter as a mystery and makes no attempt to defend this difficult characteristic of God. Paul merely tells us that on the one hand our own free will plays an enormous role in our destiny, but on the other hand so does God's divine intervention; and His intervention is not necessarily for each person's immediate benefit. Often there is a much larger picture in play of which we have no idea.

But rather than keep it to Himself in this particular case God chose to reveal the surprising reason that He hardened the hearts of many of His own elect against their own Jewish Messiah, Yeshua. So the third theological principle we learned from Paul is stated in verse 11:

Romans 11:11 CJB ¹¹ ***"In that case, I say, isn't it that they have stumbled with the result that they have permanently fallen away?" Heaven forbid! Quite the contrary, it is by means of their stumbling that the deliverance has come to the Gentiles, in order to provoke them to jealousy.***

Just to be clear: "they" that have stumbled are the hardened Jews, just as "them" who will be provoked to jealousy are these same hardened Jews. So God reveals that as strange as it may seem, He reached down from Heaven and intentionally hardened the hearts of thousands, millions, of His own elect in order that the Gospel would be taken to the gentiles who were NOT His elect; and this was so that gentiles could also be saved.

But the strangeness of God's decision doesn't stop there; the final few words of verse 11 say: "In order to provoke them (the hardened Jews) to jealousy." So God has intentionally hardened the hearts of the majority of Jews in order that gentiles can be saved in huge numbers. Yet, that, too, had a divine purpose. The now saved gentiles have been given salvation for the express purpose of provoking to jealousy all those Jews that God hardened so that they, too, will be saved! I call this phenomenon The Circle of Salvation.

But Paul has even more to say on this subject in Romans 11. Up to now, and for the past few chapters (at the very least since chapter 7) Paul has been aiming his monologue primarily at

Jews. But now in Romans 11:13 he abruptly changes up and turns primarily towards gentiles. Open your Bible to Romans 11 and we'll read from verse 13 to the end.

RE-READ ROMANS CHAPTER 11:13 – end

The opening words of verse 13 make it clear that Paul is refocusing his thoughts towards the gentiles of the congregation in Rome. And now that we've read those remaining verses of chapter 11 we can see that from the far view Paul's purpose is to make sure that gentile Believers understand that just because God hardened so many Jews IN ORDER that gentiles would be saved, gentiles shouldn't misunderstand God's motives for doing so. The goal all along remains the same: that all Israel would be saved.

Verses 13 and 14 have Paul explaining that even though he indeed is an emissary to gentiles, he is and remains a Jew. He refers to the Jews as "my own people"; so Paul continues to stay firmly identified with the Jewish people. For most of us that seems self-evident but to much of the Church this comes as a surprise. Most often when Paul is depicted in a painting, it is as a European: whether that is Spanish, English, or French. Often he has a thin pale face, a pointy mustache and is tall and slender. I have seen precious few depictions of Paul as an olive skinned, dark haired, brown eyed Hebrew. This is not by accident; there is a sub-conscious perspective of Paul that has been ingrained within Christianity for at least 18 centuries that since Paul is the Apostle to the

gentiles, then surely he must have re-identified himself more as a gentile than with his original Jewish heritage. Never mind that at every turn he speaks of the Jews as "his people" or "his brethren" or even carefully recounts his personal heritage both from a national and religious viewpoint as a Jew, and from a tribal viewpoint as a Benjamite. In Philippians 3:5 he even adds to that by saying that he is a Pharisee.

Philippians 3:4-5 CJB *If anyone else thinks he has grounds for putting confidence in human qualifications, I have better grounds: ⁵ • b'rit-milah on the eighth day, • by birth belonging to the people of Isra'el, • from the tribe of Binyamin, • a Hebrew-speaker, with Hebrew-speaking parents, • in regard to the Torah, a Parush.....*

So let's put aside this nonsensical fantasy that Paul was some kind of a convert to a gentile, or had any gentile DNA in him whatsoever. He was a Jew through and through and proudly proclaimed a long Israelite heritage on several occasions, as recorded by his own hand in the New Testament.

What he is explaining in verse 14 is that even though he has just said that it is God's purpose for saved gentiles to provoke unsaved Jews to jealousy and hopefully redemption, Paul at least partly agreed to this thankless task of evangelizing gentiles (that put him at odds with most of his own people) in order that he, too, might provoke Jews to jealousy and thus urge them on to salvation in Yeshua. That is, Paul the Messianic Jew provoking to jealousy traditional Jews. In verse 15 he expounds upon his reasoning by saying that if Jews casting aside their Messiah means reconciliation with God for the world, that Jews (in much larger numbers) finally accepting Yeshua will have an even greater impact! Please notice Paul's use of the term

“world”. “World” here means non-Jews: gentiles. So here we get a very good definition of what Paul means by “the world” in his letters. The “world”, for Paul, usually means unsaved gentiles: pagans. So for Paul the “world” is set over and against the Jewish people in the sense of non-Jews versus Jews, and in the sense of worshippers of pagan gods versus worshippers of the God of Israel. But even more, once a gentile becomes saved, he graduates out of the world and into the Kingdom of God. So for Paul a Believer, including a gentile Believer, is no longer part of “the world”.

Where would Paul have derived his understanding of what “the world” is? While I have no proof of it, I think it must have been something that the risen Yeshua showed to Him, likely through another Believer in Damascus when Paul was first selected and recovering from his blindness and (no doubt) trauma of meeting the resurrected Messiah. As Believers, it is common for us to speak about “the world”. But what does Christ mean by it? What does the New Testament in general mean by the term “the world”? And where as Believers do we fit? Here is what Christ had to say, at length, in a recorded prayer that Yeshua prayed to the Father.

John 17:1-18 CJB

¹ After Yeshua had said these things, he looked up toward heaven and said, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you-

² just as you gave him authority over all mankind, so that he might give eternal life to all those whom you have given him. ³ And eternal life is this: to know you, the one true God, and him whom you sent, Yeshua the Messiah. ⁴ "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.

⁵ Now, Father, glorify me alongside yourself. Give me the same glory I had with you before the world existed. ⁶ "I made your name known to the people you gave me out of the world. They were yours, you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, ⁸ because the words you gave me I have given to them, and they have received them. They have really come to know that I came from you, and they have come to trust that you sent me. ⁹ "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given to me, because they are yours.

¹⁰ Indeed, all I have is yours, and all you have is mine, and in them I have been glorified.

¹¹ Now I am no longer in the world. They are in the world, but I am coming to you. Holy Father, guard them by the power of your name, which you have given to me, so that they may be one, just as we are. ¹² When I was with them, I guarded them by the power of your name, which you have given to me; yes, I kept watch over them; and not one of them was destroyed (except the one meant for destruction, so that the Tanakh might be fulfilled).

¹³ But now, I am coming to you; and I say these things while I am still in the world so

that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ "I have given them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world- just as I myself do not belong to the world.

¹⁵ I don't ask you to take them out of the world, but to protect them from the Evil One. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Set them apart for holiness by means of the truth- your word is truth. ¹⁸ Just as you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Clearly the term “the world” has a double meaning. On the one hand “the world” is meant as the secular people of our day mean it: the total human population of planet Earth and all that accompanies it. But on the other hand, from a spiritual perspective, “the world” is the unsaved. So clearly gentiles are part of “the world” UNTIL we become Believers, and then we’re not. Just as clearly Jews are not, and have never been, part of “the world” as God sees it. And yet, since Yeshua’s advent, Jews are not as distinct from “the world” as they may have once thought they were.

Thus Jews and gentile Believers are seen by our Lord as separate from “the world” and therefore that is how we are to see ourselves. And, folks; this is not an easy place to be so struggle is to be expected. We are truly hanging suspended; no longer of the world, but still in the world. Not yet in Heaven, but being asked to live a Heavenly lifestyle while still in this world. The Good News is that our Savior lived in the same condition as we do so He understands our predicament and can relate to us; and He is our advocate in Heaven.

In verse 16 Paul is going to use two metaphors to tell the gentiles that despite their good fortune of being marked for salvation by God, hardened Israel still has a future with Yehoveh. The imagery that Paul employs is first of all a baked product made of grain, and it is taken from Numbers 15.

Numbers 15:18-21 CJB

¹⁸ "Speak to the people of Isra'el; tell them, 'When you enter the land where I am bringing you ¹⁹ and eat bread produced in the land, you are to set aside a portion as a gift for ADONAI.

²⁰ Set aside from your first dough a cake as a gift; set it aside as you would set aside a portion of the grain from the threshing-floor. ²¹ From your first dough you will give ADONAI a portion as a gift through all your generations.

Paul is using the theological principle of firstfruits to develop his thought. Numbers 15 speaks of offering up to God a piece of the bread dough that is made from grain grown and harvested in the Promised Land. Even to this day, some Jews when baking Challah bread (that special bread that is made as a tradition for Shabbat) will pinch off a piece of the dough and throw it in a fire. However, nowhere in Numbers is it implied that the remaining portion of dough becomes “holy” as Paul says. An error in Paul’s understanding of the Torah? Probably not. One of the difficulties in interpreting the New Testament, besides the fact that we have Hebrew thought

attempting to be communicated in the Greek language, is that the writings of the New Testament are not theological treatises that have been vetted by fellow Hebrew scholars, or are they written for academics of the modern Western world. They were written using common Jewish cultural terms, idioms, expressions, and manners of speaking usual and standard for the Jewish communities of that era. Much too often, using much too little knowledge of Judaism and Jewish culture of that era, very good modern commentators will try to attach a greater level of precision to the words than are meant.

As an example: in the Gospels, when we find Yeshua either in, or on His way to, Jerusalem for the 3 Spring Feasts of Passover, Matzah, and Firstfruits, the New Testament accounts will interchange the terms Passover and Matzah. That is: while technically Passover is the first of the 3 Feasts and is only a one day feast, it is common in the New Testament to call the entire series of 3 Spring Feasts "Passover". Just as common is to refer to the entire series of 3 as "Matzah". The writer isn't confused; it was merely the standard way of speaking among lay people (Jews) in that era.

We find the same issue with the terms "holy" and "unclean" in the New Testament. Those 2 terms indeed do have, on the one hand, very precise definitions. But on the other hand they are often used in broad and imprecise ways because that's how the common Jews of the day used them. For instance: technically, unclean is a term that is ONLY used to describe something that is otherwise a permissible item to eat, wear, touch, etc. But, that otherwise permissible item can no longer be used because due to some kind of error in its handling, the item has been made ritually unclean. As an example: a piece of lamb to eat is permissible as food. However, if not handled properly (perhaps not enough blood has been drained from it), then the lamb is rendered unclean. So what is normally permissible cannot now be used. On the other hand, if an item is considered as prohibited then the handling of it becomes a moot subject. For instance: a pig cannot ever be food. Technically a pig is not unclean; it is merely prohibited to eat under any circumstance. It is not food no matter how it is handled. So whether something is prohibited, or something is permissible but it has been mishandled and now rendered unclean, the final result is the same: it can't be used. Thus in the New Testament we'll find that sometimes the term unclean means "ritually impure" according to The Law of Moses, and other times it merely means "it can't be touched or used" for whatever reason and sometimes the reason is far more cultural than Biblical.

The term holy also became used in a similar fashion in the New Testament. There is the technical meaning for holy that means set apart for God in accordance with the Law of Moses; it can even mean that only priests can partake of whatever it might be. But in common speech among Jews it came to mean something that the lay person informally dedicated to God or it is assigned a religious connotation even if it has nothing to do with any command or regulation from the Law of Moses. The term "holy" is used in both ways in the New Testament. Let me give you an illustration. Christians are fond to say about a person that they admire that they are a "godly" man or woman. We don't mean this from a technical sense or that they are god-like, or really have any direct connection to God at all. Rather it just means that they are good, upright, and not only profess to be religious but live a life that reflects strong moral standards that exemplify good character similar to what can be found in the Bible. Very likely Paul meant holy in this sense in reference to the lump and the whole loaf; because certainly otherwise he

is simply incorrect about his claim that the whole loaf becomes ritually holy because a small piece of the dough is ritually dedicated to God, as the Torah prescribes.

So all Paul was apparently getting at is that if a portion of the whole is holy before God, then it can be assumed that the entire portion is also holy as opposed to unclean. Then he adds yet another metaphor with the use of the olive tree (a real favorite among modern Messianic Jews). He says that if a tree's roots are holy, then its branches must also be holy since they are all parts of a whole. All parts of the tree receive the same nourishment from the same source; its roots. Paul is not talking about any kind of actual Torah defined holiness; rather it is simply meant as a broad illustration. So we must not try to dissect his examples too far, but rather just get the general idea he's trying to impart that all members of a whole are infected with either the same holiness or they are defiled with the same uncleanness. A tree whose roots are unclean can't have holy branches. And, a tree whose roots are holy can't have unclean branches. However, the branches can be removed from the tree if they become diseased; they can be pruned before they infect the other branches or maybe even eventually kill the roots.

What is the whole loaf of bread an illustration of? What is the olive tree with its branches and roots illustrating? Both are illustrations of the same thing: the Jewish people (or more technically, the Hebrew people in total since the Jews are but a remnant of the original Hebrew people). After introducing the two illustrations of verse 16, in verse 17 Paul takes the metaphor of the olive tree a bit further when he speaks of grafting a wild olive tree into the trunk of a cultivated olive tree. The wild olive represents gentiles. The cultivated olive tree represents Jews. So the image is of something somewhat similar but not quite the same (the wild olive), being grafted into something that has been carefully cultivated and cared for by a gardener. I've heard horticulturalists try to tear this apart with scientific tests and methods but Paul was not a horticulturist or even a farmer. This passage was not intended as a lesson on tree grafting; it was merely a general word picture for use by people of an ancient world where most worked in agriculture at one task or another and rudimentary grafting was in common use.

Thus continuing with agricultural terms, Paul warns that the wild olive derives a benefit from being grafted into the cultivated olive; it receives the same care and nourishment that the cultivated olive receives since the wild olive has been artificially made part of the cultivated tree. But, the wild olive doesn't ever convert and become a cultivated olive, or replace the cultivated olive, and the wild olive should not think that it does. Therefore, using the grammatical technique called personification (assigning a human attribute to something that isn't human), the wild olive should not boast about its good fortune of being attached to the cultivated olive tree. And especially it should not think that it can become better than the original, natural, cultivated olive tree.

What is the main reason for the wild olive being cautioned to not get proud? Because the wild olive branches have been grafted in where some of the natural branches of the cultivated olive tree were removed. And why were the cultivated olive branches removed from their own tree? Because they were found to have no trust. Clearly since it is "trust" in Messiah's faithfulness that Paul has been preaching since chapter 1, this is what he is speaking of here. Therefore if some wild olives (gentiles) were grafted onto the cultivated Jewish olive tree, they shouldn't

expect a different treatment or outcome than the natural branches received. That is, the gentile branches stay attached only so long as that trust remains sincere, active and alive. The moment trust ends, the wild olive branches (like the original cultivated branches) are pruned off of the tree by God and thereby removed from their source of life and sustenance.

There have been never ending debates in theological circles about the roots of the cultivated olive tree and what they represent and what their nourishment is. It is usual in Christian circles to say that the roots are Jesus. Sorry, that just doesn't work for all kinds of reasons. First, the cultivated olive tree is clearly the Jewish people in general; not Believers per se. Second, the natural branches of the tree that remain on the tree are Believing Jews, but the trunk and the root system have always been Jewish (Hebrew). Third, the roots of the Jewish people are the Patriarchs. But fourth, what makes the Patriarchs the Patriarchs is the covenant of Abraham. Without that covenant there is no Father Abraham and no line of promise to hand down to Isaac and then to Jacob. Without the Abrahamic covenant there is no division of the world into gentiles and Hebrews. And further, whenever Yeshua is described from a horticultural perspective in the Bible He is not a root; He is either a shoot or a vine. He Himself has a root that He springs from. And Yeshua's root is Jacob, through the tribe of Judah, the clan of Jessie (described in horticultural terms as the stump), and the family of King David.

So here is the unmistakable theological principle that Paul makes; one that much of the institutional Church has denied and hated for 1800 years. Gentile Believers (Christians) exist and are sustained spiritually **only** by being artificially attached to a strong Jewish source, itself fed from the Covenant of Abraham. Israel's covenants with God are what make Israel, Israel. And what makes gentiles saved and forgiven is the goal of those same covenants: Yeshua, of the family of King David. Christ, the Jew. So when some elements of Christianity demand that the Old Testament and all it represents is abolished, what is being demanded is that Paul's cultivated olive tree that we as Believers are grafted into....the place where we receive our life and sustenance..... is cut down, and its root system is dug up and destroyed. This is spiritual suicide.

So as alien branches that have been, by God's grace, grafted into the natural olive tree (the Hebrew tree) that God has been cultivating for millennia, what should the attitude of gentile Christians be? Confident? Arrogant? Superior? Paul gives us that answer in verse 20: "Don't be arrogant; on the contrary be terrified!" Why should we be terrified? Verse 21: "For if God didn't spare the natural branches, he certainly won't spare you". Gentile Believers, we are foreign objects unnaturally attached to the natural olive tree. If God was willing to prune off branches that grew naturally from the tree He had so carefully and lovingly cultivated for so many centuries, but some of those branches became diseased and stopped trusting, how much quicker will He be to cut off those formerly alien branches that show signs of the same disease of non-trust? It was God's gift of mercy to the foreign branches, not to the natural tree, that we were grafted in.

Paul says in verse 22 that God has two sides of his character to be aware of: a side of kindness towards those who trust, and a side of severity for those who stop trusting. How do you stop trusting if you never trusted in the first place? I want to put another dent in the unscriptural doctrine of once-saved-always-saved. Here is yet another example of God

warning Believers to maintain the trust that saved us or we'll be removed from God's covenants and destroyed. Question: who are the wild olives that are grafted into the cultivated tree? Are they any and all gentiles...pagans; or are they only Believing gentiles? It is self evident that they are only Believers. Why would God cut off non-Believing Jews who don't trust and replace them with non-Believing gentiles who don't trust? Besides as Paul says: the only reason gentiles are grafted in is because of our trust.

So, is the warning that we should maintain that trust or we'll be cut off the tree just a hypothetical situation that can't possibly happen? The once saved always saved doctrine says it is; says it can't happen. In fact once saved always saved adherents say that every warning in the New Testament (and there are several) of a Believer falling away or of the Lord refusing to recognize them, or blocking their entry into the Kingdom of God can't actually happen. So by that reasoning here in Romans 11 we have yet another and this time it is Paul who is making the hollow threat. If such a thing is impossible, why are we supposed to be terrified of being removed off the tree? Did we get there accidentally? Why are we to strive to remain in God's kindness through our trust if under no circumstance can we let go of our trust and then our salvation is revoked?

But then comes the part that no doubt Paul was so very anxious to get to. He says this in verses 23 and 24:

Romans 11:23-24 CJB ²³ *Moreover, the others, if they do not persist in their lack of trust, will be grafted in; because God is able to graft them back in.*²⁴ *For if you were cut out of what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree!*

Paul says that those hardened Jews (the cut-off branches) WILL be grafted back into their OWN tree if they will finally trust. So the hardening that God put upon His people will end, and they will be offered their place back as a branch on the cultivated olive tree because it is their tree in the first place!

Stony hearts turned to soft hearts that trust. Jews that had their hearts hardened towards Messiah finally become Believers and are saved. Where have we heard this?

Ezekiel 36:24-28 CJB

²⁴ *For I will take you from among the nations, gather you from all the countries, and return you to your own soil.* ²⁵ *Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your idols.* ²⁶ *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit inside you; I will take the stony heart out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.* ²⁷ *I will put my Spirit inside you and cause you to live by my laws, respect my rulings and obey them.* ²⁸ *You will live in the land I gave to your ancestors. You will be my people, and I will be your God.*

We'll continue with Romans chapter 11 next time.