

Romans 11:7-36 “The Olive Tree”
Isaiah 10:12-11:16 Psalm 80

November 30, 2008

Isaiah 10-11 speaks of Assyria as the axe in God’s hand chopping down the forests

Isaiah 6-12 begins with Isaiah’s vision of the Holy One of Israel,
and the cleansing of Isaiah’s lips to speak a message of judgment
against Israel and Judah.

In chapters 7-8 Isaiah introduces his three children:

Shear-Jashub (7:3) which means “a remnant shall return”
Immanuel (7:15) which means “God with us”
and Maher-shalal-hashbaz (8:1) which means “quick to the spoil, hasten to the prey.”

And in chapter 9 Isaiah spoke of the “son” who would sit on the throne of David forever.

Now in Isaiah 10-11 Isaiah speaks of how all this is going to happen.

Think about the names of the children:
a remnant shall return, God with us, the plunderer hastens.

That is the message of these chapters.

First, the plunderer comes!

The King of Assyria is an axe in the hand of Yahweh.

At the end of chapter 10,
you almost feel like a scout watching the Assyrian advance,
and reporting back to the trembling inhabitants of Jerusalem
as the dark hosts of Assyria plant themselves
before the very gates of the city.

But behold, Adonai Yahweh of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low.

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon will fall by the Majestic One.”

When God felled the forests of Israel and Judah,
Assyria was the axe in his hand.

But Assyria should remember that an axe is a tool.

And while God will use the King of Assyria to cut down the forests of Israel and Judah,
once he is finished, God will burn down the forests of Assyria.

And indeed as 10:20-23 says, a remnant *will* return (shear-jashub).

So Maher-shalal-hashbaz, the plunderers will quickly come;
and then shear-jashub—a remnant will return;
but what about Immanuel?

That's what the last section is about.

After all this language of chopping down trees and forests,
we hear of the stump of Jesse.
The glorious tree of the house of David will be chopped down.
But the stump will send forth a shoot.

After shear-jashub comes Immanuel.
The son of David will be restored to the throne.

The Holy One of Israel,
who has not left his people without a remnant,
but has sent that great remnant of one—
the sprout from the stump of Jesse—
Immanuel, God with us.

Psalm 80 speaks of this same theme with respect to Israel as a whole.
So let us sing Psalm 80...

Introduction (11:7-12)

In verse 7, we have come to the final “what then” of Romans.
From chapters 3-11 Paul has used this to structure his argument.
And his final “what then” returns to the theme of his first “what then” –
what about Israel?

3:1 – “What then the advantage of the Jews?”
And Paul had answered – “much in every way.”

But then in 3:9, “What then? Are we Jews any better off?”
And Paul had answered – “No, not at all.
For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”

This contrast returns here in Romans 11 as Paul explains the relationship
between Jews and Gentiles in God's purposes in election.

In verse 7 Paul says
Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.
Paul had earlier said that Israel pursued a law that would lead to righteousness.
The problem was that this pursuit was by works.
“seeking to establish their own righteousness,
they did not submit to God's righteousness
For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”
(10:3-4)

But when Paul says that “Israel” failed to obtain this righteousness,
he does not mean “every” Israelite.

We are going to have to watch Paul’s use of “Israel” throughout this passage,
because sometimes he means “ethnic Israel” while other times he means the remnant.

As he says in verse 7,
The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.

And we saw last time that Israel stumbled so that salvation might come to the Gentiles.

As Paul says in verse 12,
*Now if their trespass means riches for the world,
and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles,
how much more will their full inclusion mean.*

This word for “full inclusion” is the word *pleroma* (or fullness).

The ESV points that out in a footnote –
which is helpful because the same word will be used in verse 25.

In verse 12 Paul is talking about the fullness of Israel.

In verse 25 Paul is talking about the fullness of the Gentiles.

But in both passages Paul is talking about the salvation of “all Israel.”

In order to understand this we need to see three things:

First, the rejection of the Jews means the reconciliation of the world (v13-16).

Second, there is only one people of God – the olive tree of Abraham (v17-24).

Third, the partial hardening of Israel is part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world
(v25-32).

1. The Rejection of the Jews and the Reconciliation of the World (11:13-16)

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.

*Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry
in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous,
and thus save some of them. (13-14)*

While Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles,
that does not mean that he ignores his fellow-countrymen.

He hopes that as Israel comes to see that the promises to Abraham are coming true
(God’s blessing is coming to the nations),
they will also come to faith in the Messiah Jesus.

Paul sees that his ministry to the Gentiles is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham

that through Abraham the blessing of God would come to the Gentiles.

And Paul sees that the rejection of the Jews is the means that God has used to bring reconciliation to the world.

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world,

Wait a minute!

In 11:1 Paul asked, “has God rejected his people?”

And he answered: “By no means!” *Me genoito!*

But here in 11:15 he speaks of the rejection of Israel.

So has rejected his people or not?

Paul actually uses two different words, each of which mean “rejection”!

But it would be very difficult to translate them differently.

The word in 11:1 means to push aside.

Here in verse 15 it is to remove someone from a particular association.

In other words, God has not set aside Israel.

In 11:1 Paul makes it clear that Israel is not set aside in order to establish a new people.

There is no “parenthesis” where Israel is set aside for the “church age.”

Rather, as 11:15 says, the rejection of Israel is a particular rejection – they are not set aside:

rather, faithful Israel continues,

but unbelieving Israel has been removed from their unique relationship

(or, to use the image Paul will use later – they are branches cut off from the olive tree).

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world,

what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? (15)

Paul says that there is a reciprocal relationship between Israel and the Gentiles.

The rejection of Israel means the reconciliation of the world.

God is rejecting Israel in order to reconcile the nations.

But then remember what God had said to Abraham:

those who bless you will be blessed.

As the Gentiles now bless the seed of Abraham (Jesus Christ),

they will be blessed in their inclusion into the people of God,

which then results in the completion of Israel—

the fullness of Israel—

which results in life from the dead.

If this isn't clear yet,
then let's keep going,
because Paul will explain what he means:

*If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump,
and if the root is holy, so are the branches. (16)*

Firstfruits and root are used in parallel here.

If the first part of the dough is holy – then the whole lump is holy.

If the root is holy, then so are the branches.

The root – the firstfruits – refers to Abraham (and indeed, to the holy line –
to the seed of Abraham throughout history – the remnant that has believed and obeyed).
And as such the firstfruits image should also remind us of Christ,
who through the resurrection from the dead became the firstfruits from the dead.

But especially as we think about this image of the tree,
we need to understand that Paul is thinking historically about the root
(and so also about the firstfruits).

So let us turn our attention to Paul's usage of the image of the olive tree in verses 17-24.

2. The Olive Tree and the Branches (11:17-24)

*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.
If you are, remember it is not you who support the root,
but the root that supports you. (17-18)*

Paul is speaking to the Gentiles (wild olive branches).

Some of the branches (namely, some biological descendents of Abraham –
who did not believe in the Messiah)
were broken off.

And you were grafted in.

It is important to understand that in the agricultural practice of the time,
you would take a *good* branch and graft it into a bad tree.

After all, the wild olive branch will produce wild olives.

You would never take a wild olive branch and graft it onto a good tree –
because then you would get wild olives!

So rather, you would take a cultivated olive branch and graft it onto a bad tree,
so that the strong root of a bad tree would produce good fruit.

But Paul is saying is that this root is far more powerful than an ordinary olive tree.
The lifegiving power of this root is able to make a wild olive branch
bear good fruit.

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.*

So do not become proud, but fear.

For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. (19-21)

How should we think about the Jews today?

When you drive past a synagogue, what should you think?

The Jews are broken branches.

It is not as though there are two separate trees –
one tree for the Jews, and another for the Gentiles.

There is one olive tree,
whose root goes down through history all the way to Abraham.

So the Jews are broken branches.

But they are broken branches *from* the olive tree.

And we have been grafted on in their place.

But how ought we to think about this?

We should not become proud.

But rather we should fear.

Why?

Because think about this history that Paul has related through chapters 9-10.

It is a history of the people of God becoming proud and rebelling.

It is a history of God's judgment against his own people.

And while in the new covenant the gospel has gone forth to the ends of the earth,
this pattern of rebellion, judgment and blessing only for a remnant,
has not disappeared.

Look at the Middle East.

Once upon a time from Egypt to Assyria was a highway of blessing,
as the nations that had oppressed Israel

believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,

and for 500 years the gospel triumphed in the lands of Israel's enemies.

But they did not stand fast,

and today there is only a remnant that has not bowed the knee to Allah.

Look at Europe.

The gospel spread to the pagans, and for 1,000 years it flourished.

But they did not stand fast,

and today there is only a remnant that has not bowed the knee to science.

So do not become proud, but fear.

For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.

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. (22)

There is such a thing as apostasy.

If you rebel and fall away from Christ,

then you will be cut off.

God is kind and good to those who continue in his kindness.

But God is severe in his judgment against rebels.

Let me ask you,

is your God severe in his judgment against rebels?

So often you hear people say, "Oh, well, my God would never do that!"

"I serve a God of love and kindness!"

He is merciful.

But he is also just.

If you doubt his severity, then just go to Jerusalem and stand at the Wailing Wall –
the last piece of a temple that God cast down 1,938 years ago.

When his people trusted more in the temple than they trusted in him,

he took away their temple,

and for 1,938 years he has prevented them from building it again.

He is patient...

He is kind...

He is merciful...

to those who continue in his kindness!

to those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus!

But if you continue in rebellion against him,

rest assured, you *will* learn about his severity!

Just ask the Jews!

But in the end, God's mercy triumphs over judgment,
As Paul says in verse 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. (23)*

And Paul explains this in terms of a basic principle of horticulture:

*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. (24)*

The olive tree is Israel.

If God can take a wild olive branch and graft it (contrary to nature) into Israel,
then how much more easily will it be for a natural branch (a Jews)
to be grafted back into Israel.

3. The Partial Hardening of Israel and the Fullness of the Gentiles (11:25-32)

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers:

*a partial hardening has come upon Israel,
until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.
And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,
“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;
“and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.” (25-27)*

When Paul says “all Israel will be saved”

he is not saying that everyone biologically descended from Abraham will be saved.

That would be a very strange thing for Paul to say,

since he has gone to great lengths to demonstrate
that biological descent is *not* what matters most.

Rather he is saying that the whole remnant will believe.

And this remnant *includes* the fullness of the Gentiles.

Paul is not saying that there are two peoples of God:

the Jewish Israel and the Gentile Church.

Rather, Paul says that the Gentiles are being included in Israel.

This might lead one to say that “national” Israel has been superceded by the church.

And yet Paul seems to retain some sense of the importance of national Israel. (3:1, 9:4-5)

As we have seen, there is still a remnant – as in the days of Elijah.

The hardening of Israel – the stumbling and falling of Israel (v11 and 22) – is not final.

While at this time there is only a remnant,
the point is to gather in the fullness of Israel (11:12),
and the fullness of the Gentiles (11:25).

The point of the remnant is that the remnant is a firstfruits of the fullness.

God's purpose is to bring salvation to the world through Israel.
In Abraham's seed, all the nations are blessed.

Notice that Paul says nothing about an eschatological conversion here.

(Some have said that the conversion of Israel will be a sign of the end.
Paul says nothing about that here.)

Paul does not say that when the fullness of the Gentiles have come in,
then Israel will come to faith.

Rather Paul says that *thus* (through the fullness of the Gentiles coming in)
all Israel will be saved.

Paul's point is that there is an interdependence between the salvation of the Jews
and the salvation of the Gentiles.

As Herman Ridderbos puts it,

“Israel, which was chosen from among the gentiles [in Abraham], must,
contrary to every human expectation, first give way to the gentiles.
But as Israel because of its disobedience has become a cause of salvation for the gentiles,
now the gentiles must provoke Israel to jealousy....
God grants no mercy to Israel without the gentiles,
but neither does he do so to the gentiles without Israel.
As he first shut up all under disobedience, so will he have mercy on all.” (359-360)

In other words, it is not so much that the church is the “new” Israel,
but rather that the church is grafted *into* Israel.

The church does not replace Israel.

The church does not become Israel.

The church is *grafted into* Israel.

“Thus, on the one hand Paul is able to see the church...

as endowed with all the privileges and blessings of Israel...

and yet on the other to uphold to the full

the continuation of God's original redemptive intentions with Israel
as the historical people of God.

And all this is because of the gracious character of God's election and because of Christ,

who is the seed of Abraham as well as the second Adam:
the one in whom the whole church, Jews and gentiles together,
has become one body and one new man.” (360)

And Paul tells us how we ought to think of our relationship to the Jews in verses 28-32:

*As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God 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.*

The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.
Once God has called you, there is no turning back (without facing severe judgment!).

Some people like to talk about America’s “godly heritage” –
suggesting that because our forefathers were Christian,
therefore America should still be Christian.

There is a measure of truth to that.
But in exactly the same way,
Egypt was once Christian,
as was Iraq, and Syria, and Turkey.

But none of these nations could ever be said to be “beloved for the sake of their forefathers.”
It is true that a Syrian or an Egyptian could be said to be a broken branch off the tree.
But they are wild olive branches broken off of the cultivated tree of Israel.

But the Jews are natural branches –
and therefore in spite of their enmity to Christ and to the gospel,
they are still beloved for the sake of their forefathers.

*For just as you were at one time disobedient to God
but now have received mercy because of their disobedience,
so they too have now been disobedient
in order that by the mercy shown to you
they also may now receive mercy. (28-31)*

God’s purpose was first to show mercy on the Gentiles through the rebellion of Israel,
and then through the mercy shown to the Gentiles,
he would also show mercy to Israel.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. (32)

Conclusion: Who Has Known the Mind of the Lord? (11:33-36)

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

*“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”*

Origen pointed out that,

“Paul did not say that God’s judgments were hard to search out
but that they could not be searched out at all.
He did not say that God’s ways were hard to find out
but that they were impossible to find out.
For however far one may advance in the search and make progress
through an increasingly earnest study,
even when aided and enlightened in the mind by God’s grace,
he will never be able to reach the final goal of his inquiries.”
(On First Principles, 4.3.14)

How do you respond to that?

Does it frustrate you that you cannot figure out how God works?
Do you get upset when God sends things spinning again?

The moment we start to think that we understand God –
that everything God does makes sense to us –
is the moment when we have passed from knowing and loving God,
to chasing an idol of our own fantasy!
If you have a problem with the fact that you cannot wrap your mind around God,
then your problem is that you want a god that you can control and manipulate.

The incomprehensibility of God should not discourage us,
rather, it should encourage us to continue to study and seek to know God more.
Because it means that if knowing God is your quest,
then you will have a lifetime – indeed an eternity – to learn and grow!

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

From him (he is the creator of all things)
Through him (he is the sustainer of all things)
To him (he is the goal and end of all things)

To him be glory forever. Amen.