

All Roads Lead Here: The Olive Branches
By Jason Huff
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Jeremiah 11:15-17; John 15:1-8; Romans 11:16-32

Our final Scripture reading this week is Romans 11:16-32. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

Have you ever been offered tickets to a really big event because someone else couldn’t make it? It’s pretty rare; I’m not sure it’s ever happened to me. But I hear about it happening to other people. Someone gets box seats right behind home plate at a Tigers game or VIP passes to U2 or Billy Joel or something. And the story often goes like this: “at the last minute, my friend realized that he couldn’t use the tickets, so he just gave them to me.” Apparently, I need to run with better friends! But I think I’d get worried – what if they came back and said, “Hey, you know, we can make it to the Lions game after all!” Do I have to give them back? What would you do? All I know is that some people have had super times at great events because someone else decided they had something better to do.

That’s an analogy similar to what Paul talks about in today’s passage. This is essentially the last time in Romans that he deals with the Jewish nature of Christianity and the question of the salvation of the Jewish people. He wants to make sure that we who are Gentiles, who were not part of the original promise to Abraham’s people, understand our place and the Jewish place in God’s plan of redemption. What Paul teaches us about God’s plan is meant to humble us and show us that God’s mercy circles back over and over again to His people.

In the first part of this passage, Paul describes for us what happened that we might be saved. All believers, Jews and Gentiles alike, are made holy by being rooted and centered in Jesus Christ, our Savior. “If the root is holy, so are the branches.” We are rooted into Christ when we come to faith in Him, when we trust in Him and not in ourselves, when we count on Him for salvation and begin to live in ways that show we belong to Him.

But how do we come to be a part of God’s vine, of Jesus’ olive tree? We don’t believe in Jesus naturally; the gospel has to be preached to us and taught to us. And salvation comes from the Jews – that’s what Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:22, describing Himself as one in the line of David. How is it that we, who have no root in Judaism in any way, can somehow benefit from the salvation God promised to Abraham’s people ages ago?

It comes from the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus described it in Luke 14 and Matthew 22. He says the Kingdom of God is like a great wedding banquet where a man invited many, many people to attend. When the time finally came, though, a lot of the people began to make excuses – I just got married, I have to test out some new oxen I just bought, I have to inspect the field I just purchased. (Now this isn’t in our language, but to us, it would be like, “Sorry I can’t come to your banquet – I’m trying out my new iPhone. Can’t come – it’s bowling night.” I mean, the excuses are super lame. It’s embarrassing.)

So the man had his servants go out and bring in anybody in the streets – the poor, the lame, the homeless, and they got to come to the banquet. And there were more seats, so he told his servants, go out into the countryside, go out into the fields and gardens, find anybody you can. He said, those I invited who wouldn’t come won’t get a bite, but all these others will enjoy my feast.

The Jewish people are those who were actually invited to the feast. The invitation wasn’t to us at first. The Jewish people were the original olive branches rooted in the good olive tree of God. They were the ones that all the promises of Jesus were originally for. But they didn’t want them. They had their own way, the way of the Pharisees and rabbis, rather than the way of Christ. And so now we’re invited. We’re the ones who have come to the feast – not the original guests, but the beggars on the streets who simply came looking to find a decent meal. We’re the ones from the wild olive tree grafted into God’s good one. It’s just like those concert tickets or ball game tickets...we didn’t pay for those tickets, but they were given to us because someone didn’t want them.

Now I want us to see just how beautiful this analogy is. In doing some study this week, I found out that in Horticulture 101, the last thing you do is take bad or wild olive branches and graft them into a cultivated olive tree. As Paul himself says, it’s contrary to nature. It’s a good way to kill the tree because the wild branches take all the nourishment from the rest of the tree and leave nothing for them. This is a big no-no, enough that some commentators have said, “Oh, poor dumb Paul, city boy, he didn’t know anything about how to take care of olive trees.” Well, I tell you what, I trust Paul a lot more than a modern commentator trying to show how smart he is.

Here's what we see over and over in Scripture: if you touch an unclean thing, it makes you unclean. Touch a dead body, touch a pig, walk through a graveyard, lots of other things, they make you unclean. It kind of rubs off on you. It's the way we often think about people, too; we don't hang around people who do a lot of bad things or break the law often because it rubs off on us and we start to think that maybe it's OK.

But when God gets involved, all of a sudden, everything turns around. Jesus is touched by a woman who's bleeding, by lepers, by all sorts of people who are ritually unclean. And is Jesus made unclean by them? No! In fact, the opposite happens. He is so pure, so clean, so perfect, that their uncleanness is healed and they can return to society.

That's why we can be grafted into God's olive tree through Jesus. We are a part of the pagan world, a wild olive tree that had nothing to do with the God of the Bible or God's chosen people. But when God decided to graft us in, when God decided to include us, instead of us spoiling the olive tree, we start to bear good fruit! We start to grow like we're supposed to!

That's where Paul really brings us to his first point: *Our entry point into the faith should humble us and make us thankful.* God didn't make a promise to Abraham Huff 4000 years ago, or to Abraham Ruffin or Abraham Lyjak. God's promise wasn't to our furthest ancestors. God had no obligation to bring us into the fold at all. Yet He decided to do so out of His love and kindness and mercy.

Arrogance is a faith killer. I once heard a prosperity gospel preacher say that if anybody ever in your family line had ever accepted Jesus by faith, that God was obligated to bring your whole entire family line into His Kingdom. At presbytery this last week, I read a prayer by a guy trying to bring in millennials that told God that once we were saved, "You have to love me." Several of us shot that down. Why? Because we don't set the rules. We don't get to tell God what He can and can't do.

God chose to bring us into His family, but not everyone who thinks they are in the family actually has a seat at the table. As Jesus' parable about the great banquet continues, he describes how a man not wearing the proper garment for a wedding somehow got in. When the king noticed it, he had the man thrown out. In the same way, many turn out to hear about Jesus because they've heard about Him, they even want to go to heaven, but they don't want to prepare for it – dressing in Jesus' righteousness and not their own, trusting in Jesus rather than themselves.

Our best response to the invitation, to being grafted into the tree of God, is to be humbled. God has been kind to us, and will continue to be kind as we stay rooted and grounded in Him. But we cannot think that He will not cut us off, that we are not the elect, if we choose to turn back to our old ways and have nothing to do with Him. We did nothing to save ourselves, and so all the glory should go to God. If God does great things through us, if He does mighty and powerful works, if He saves our family and friends through us, if He brings thousands to Himself through His ministry, then praise God and not ourselves! God has been gracious to include us, but we cannot presume that He owes us anything or that we will stay grafted in if we are unfruitful – meaning that we do not grow in His likeness.

I'm still reminded often of our good friend Virgil, who God took home nearly a year and a half ago. Whenever he could, he would come up to me and ask me if anyone in the church needed help, and he'd give me money that would go into the Deacons' Fund. That happened for years. And every time I thanked him for anything he did, he would say, "We thank the Lord." And he would say a sentence or two about how God had blessed him. At first, it was a little off-putting – couldn't Virgil take a compliment? But as I got to know him better, it was his humility before the Lord. God saved Virgil from a pretty dark past. And so Virgil didn't take praise for what he did, because he knew it was God's work in him that made it happen.

In a world when bragging on yourself is accepted and encouraged, where everyone is looking to tell you what they've done and how good they are, it's refreshing to find someone who gives the credit to God for who they are and what they've done. If you get compliments at work for a good job and you credit God with making you what you are, you'll get some funny stares, and maybe some folks will turn away from you at the lunch table or the break room. But others will start to hear what God has done. When we acknowledge that our seat at God's table was originally meant for someone else, when we state the truth that God has by His mercy alone brought us into His family, we start to finally get the emphasis on the right person, the person of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And while we've talked about it in recent weeks, so I'm not going to make it a separate point again, I just want to point out Paul's insistence that saving faith remains in God. It's the persistence that counts. Paul says, those Jews that do not persist in unbelief, God will graft them back into the tree. Gentiles who get their act together for a time but do not persist in believing and trusting Jesus will eventually be pruned off. The call is clear – remain in Jesus. As Jesus said to His disciples, "Without me, you can do nothing. With me, you can bear much fruit."

Now in the second half of the passage, Paul deals with a subject that has created a lot of controversy. It might seem like there's no immediate application point for us, nothing immediate we have to do with it, but we need to understand what God is doing so that we have the right heart towards God's people and towards the Jews and towards the mystery of God's plans.

Paul teaches us that there has been a partial hardening of the Jewish people until the full number of Gentiles come into the Kingdom. God has intentionally left the door wide open for people from every nation, tongue, and tribe to enter. But His first promises are to Abraham and His people, and when God declares the time is right, there will be an awakening among the people of Israel to recognize that Jesus is in fact the Jewish savior.

Don't get tripped up on the word "all." In both Hebrew and Greek, "all" is an understood idiom for the vast majority. Right now, the number of Jewish people coming to believe in Jesus as the Messiah is very small, just as it has been for centuries. But God will eventually turn this around because He keeps His promises. We don't know when or how it will take place, but God will put a love for Jesus on the hearts of His original chosen people.

You never know how that will happen. This week, one of my seminary professors posted an article from a man who is an Orthodox Jew in New York City, posted in the Jewish Times. And this man was confronting the incredible cost of living as an Orthodox Jew. He said that, at minimum, to live in the way the rabbis said was necessary to be a good and faithful Jew according to their version of the law cost \$250,000 a year. And that's not for an apartment or rent or car or subway passes and whatnot. This was just to fulfill all the obligations to have your kids in the Jewish school and to eat certified Kosher and to visit Israel regularly and to practice all the laws. He said for someone who didn't have the resources available in New York City, it could be close to half a million dollars.

He rejected it, as apparently are a growing number of Orthodox Jews. Are they growing closer to believing Jesus is their Messiah? It's hard to say, but there is a realization that the law of the rabbis, the law that was in large part begun and nurtured by the Pharisees, is impossible to maintain and doesn't get you closer to God.

Have Jews and Christians been enemies? At times in history, absolutely. Paul mentions them as enemies of the good news. And yet what did Jesus call us to do? Pray for our enemies and those who persecute us. And so as we close this section of Romans and its treatment of the Jewish question, there's just a simple second talking point: *love the Jews*. It doesn't mean we don't love Palestinians or Middle Easterners or anyone else. It doesn't mean we side with them politically, necessarily. It means we are to have a special affection for them as Abraham's descendants.

The disobedience of Israel has worked out to the benefit of all people, because now all of us have the opportunity to experience the saving, resurrecting power of Jesus and His love in our lives. God wants to show them mercy, and He will do it. But to show mercy, someone has to need mercy. It's through their rejection of Jesus that Israel has to be shown God's mercy in order that they would be brought back to God. But because this is God's outworking of His divine plan, we should never slip into anti-Semitism or anything like it.

God is showing us all an incredible amount of mercy to bring us into His family, Jews and Gentiles alike. So be humbled by it. We have been grafted in. We are now rooted in Christ. Our whole life, the very source of our being, flows from Him. Don't take that for granted. I encourage you, meet with Him daily; spend time in His Word; spend time talking to Him. Can you imagine going without eating? I can't! Even on a diet, you've got to eat. How many Christians are starving spiritually because they are ignoring the feast in front of them Jesus promises? I know that it's been hard to keep up my daily time with God since I started helping Bethel with their worship, and I feel it. Once you have it in your life, when you miss it, it's like missing a meal. Don't starve when God offers you Himself as the living water and the bread of life.

We have been given something far better than free tickets to a ball game or a Broadway show. We have been given salvation. God has grafted us into His glorious vineyard, His orchard of olive trees. Stay rooted and planted in Him, and you will enjoy His presence, His love, and His mercy...as will all those who are joined to Jesus in faith.