

Grafted by Grace, Branches by Faith

Romans 11:11-24

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I have noticed over the years that my sermon illustrations often live longer than my sermons do. What do I mean? People remember illustrations. Years later I'll hear, "Hey remember when you dressed like a bum with a broken-down car on Broadway?" Or "Hey, do you remember when you dressed like Martin Luther for the church history sermon?" Or in our Romans series, "Do you remember the rappelling ropes from the ceiling?" "Remember the massive ship chain?" Illustrations help visually implant truth in our memories and hearts.

Scripture has many illustrations like that. Jesus illustrated extensively. The Apostle Paul liked to illustrate. He does so more in other letters than Romans, but before us today we have his most well-known Romans illustration. I tend toward sports and family illustrations. Paul lived in an agricultural society, so like Jesus, many of his illustrations are agrarian. We are in Indiana-based church, so this should work pretty good here too.

Our text is Romans 11:11ff. We saw last week in 11:1-10 that God always has a true Jewish remnant which evidences his ongoing faithfulness to his promises and his people. Ethnic Israel had largely rejected the Messiahship of Jesus, but like in Elijah's day, God maintains a faithful believing remnant—those Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah and Savior.

"So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. 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! 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. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" (Romans 11:11-15 ESV)

I am aware that we may have some listening who wonder, *why should I care about how Israel fits into the saving plans of God? I'm not Jewish.* The answer is, because this is the most important thing that has ever happened and understanding how God did it is an incredible privilege.

This week a movie comes out that all the gearheads are excited about. It tells the story of how a couple of guys hired by Ford built a car that would race faster than a Ferrari. Anyone interested in how a car company made a car faster than another car company? Where does that rate on the eternally important scale? Zero. Yet gearheads will flock to the movie. Today we learn how the most important thing that has ever happened happened. Anyone interested?

"So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous." (Romans 11:11)

Paul is still explaining how Israel fits into the gospel of Jesus for all people. He asks, is their stumbling because God wants them to fall completely? By no means. There's that absolute

negative again. *No way!* OK, then why are the Jews mostly not believing in Jesus? **First, their unbelief is bringing Gentiles into salvation.** How's that? Tim Keller makes the interesting point in his commentary on Romans that if the Jews had wholesale trusted in Jesus, the Gentiles would have seen it as a Jewish thing.¹ *Hey, look. The Jews have a new excitement and belief. Good for them as long as they keep it in the synagogues where it belongs!*

But what happened? The Jews rejected it and fought against it. This pushed the Apostles out of the synagogues and into the marketplace where Gentiles hang out. Read Acts and you see that repeated pattern. Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue, the Jews get riled up and force them out, they preach to the Gentiles and a mostly Gentile church is begun. The New Testament is largely letters written by Paul to Gentile churches. The Jews' rejection contributed to Gentile belief.

Secondly, Paul says in verse 11 and repeats in verse 14 **that the Gentiles' salvation is in part to make the Jews jealous.** Envious. Not in a sinful kind of jealousy, but in a good kind of jealousy. Sinful jealousy is wanting what isn't yours. But if you admire a godly couple's marriage and it inspires you to follow their pattern, that's a good envy.

Paul says that his ministry plan is for the Jews to see the spiritual blessings of the gospel among the Gentiles and inwardly long for the same. He wants the Jews to want what the Gentiles have by faith in Christ.

We can stop right there and talk about envy evangelism. This is largely the point of 1 Peter where Peter goes through a series of relationships we have in the world—citizen to government, employee to employer, wife to husband, church member to church member—and urges us to make those relationships so healthy and honorable that *"when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."* (1 Peter 2:12) Titus talks about making "the teaching about God our Savior attractive" (Titus 2:10 NIV). We think this means making great logical arguments for the gospel. The New Testament urges letting our lives make the argument and drawing unbelievers toward our new life in Christ. Make them jealous. Make them envious. Church, how's that going? Pastor Steve, how's that going?

"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!" (Romans 11:12 ESV)

Paul hints here of a future massive Jewish turning to Jesus: *"Their full inclusion."* He says in verse 15 that this revival will signal the consummation of redemptive history and final resurrection. Verse 25 says that the Jews are in an era of "partial hardening" until the era of Gentile evangelism is complete. We will look at that in a future message, but one way to see this whole chapter about the Jews and the gospel is the three Jewish "R's." *Remnant* is verses 1-10. *Rejection* (albeit temporary) is verses 11-25. *Restoration* is verses 25-32. God has not rejected the Jews even though they have largely rejected Jesus. No. There is a future for them along with all Gentile believers in one final holy people of God.

Jews and Gentiles together? Isn't that like uniting oil and water, Democrats and Republicans, Packer fans and Christians? How do these two historically divergent and hostile people groups come together?

¹ Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You*, Page Unknown.

"If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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." (Romans 11:11-24)

You don't have to be a tree expert to get this anymore than they needed to be in the first century. Paul goes with the very familiar olive tree. If you've been to the Middle East, this tree and wood is everywhere, and you can buy an olive wood sculpture of almost anything. They are for sale by every street vendor to this day. One commentator says the olive tree was the "most widely cultivated fruit tree in the Mediterranean area." (Dunn)² This would be like writing to Indiana Christians and saying, *it's like a corn plant*. Everyone is with you.

"...if the root is holy, so are the branches." (Romans 11:16)

So, who are the roots and who is the olive tree? The tree is true Israel. The remnant. Those who are actually saved. Not every ethnic Jew, but the redeemed people of God. So, who are the roots? The roots of this tree are the patriarchs and the promises God made to them. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How often does God self-designate, *I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*? These were sinful men who needed justification by faith (see Romans 4).

But in terms of the people of God formed by the promises of God, they represent the beginning. The roots. *"If the root is holy, so are the branches."* If the roots are healthy, then the branches are too. How healthy are God's promises? Totally healthy and totally holy. The roots of this tree are deep and well-watered by God. Any branch connected to these roots is also holy.

"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." (Romans 11:17-18)

So, now we are introduced to a second tree. You have the cultivated olive tree and the wild olive shoot or sapling. This is the difference between landscaping trees at the garden center and some random little tree in the back woods. The cultivated tree is the people of God tree. The wild sapling branch represents Gentile believers.

So, what is grafting? I'm going to guess most of us aren't doing this kind of thing much, but it was common in the first century as a way to bring life to a tree. However, they actually did the opposite of what Paul says here. They wouldn't put a wild tree in a cultivated tree, but they would put a healthy branch of a good tree in a dying tree. The idea is that the sap of

² James D.G. Dunn as quoted by Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, p. 370.

the healthy tree would revitalize the sick tree. Bring it back to health and a good harvest of olives.

One commentator makes the very interesting point on why Paul would reverse the normal grafting process, *"As little as a wild olive shoot would not have any right to be grafted into a cultivated tree, so little right do Gentiles have to be given a place in the people of God. But such is precisely the effects of God's grace."* (Moo)³

Whether that's why, I don't know, but it certainly is a great point. *How do I, the wild olive branch, find myself connected to the promises and patriarchs of God?*

"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." (Romans 11:17-18)

This is the point Paul is making. *Hey Gentiles, do you realize you are by birth spiritually ostracized? On the fringe? Marginalized? You are the spiritual saplings out in the woods. Do you realize the grace of God to pluck you out of the wilderness and put you into his sacred tree?*

I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 11:18, *"Remember, you aren't feeding the root; the root is feeding you."*⁴

That is Paul's general point. Gentile believer, know your place. Realize the grace of this. Don't think you deserve to be in the tree of life, or you will fall into the same trap as Jews who thought their DNA earned them their place in God's kingdom.

"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." (Romans 11:19-21)

Wait, I thought once saved, always saved. Once in the tree, always in the tree. What do you mean, broken off? You'll need to come back again as we will look at what this means for the eternal security of the believer.

What is Paul saying? [See the video of Steve's demonstration at 28:19]. I have two Christmas trees here. One is green, the other they call iridescent. The green tree represents the cultivated olive tree of the people of God. The iridescent is the wild olive tree, the tree in the woods. What can we say about the green tree? Its roots go back to Genesis 12, all the way back to promises God made to Abraham. Over the centuries this tree has had millions and millions of branches. All descendants of Abraham.

However, not all the branches of this tree remain connected to this tree [Steve takes branches off as he talks]. What about Caiaphas? Is he connected? No, he refused to believe in Jesus. What about Judas? Is he connected? No, his branch was pruned off. He didn't believe in Jesus. Indeed, every ethnic Jew that has not believed in Jesus has been removed

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, p. 370-371.

⁴ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

from the tree. What removes you? Verse 20, *because of their unbelief*. God breaks off the spiritually dead branches. Some branches remain, including the Apostle Paul.

The shocking development which the Apostles were slow to realize is that God is both a *pruner* and a *grafter*. God is taking wild and unnatural branches from the wilderness and grafting them into the tree of the people of God. These Gentiles, these uncircumcised, non-Jew, non-Old Covenant pagans are getting grafted INTO the tree. If the ethnic Jews are broken off because of unbelief, how are the Gentiles grafted in?

"They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith." (Romans 11:20)

These Jewish branches are here by faith in Jesus. Gentile branches are grafted in by faith in Jesus. The Jewish believers' faith is nourished and kept alive by the sap flowing from ancient roots in the patriarchs of Israel. Gentile believers also are nourished by ancient sap from ancient patriarchs and ancient promises.

What is Paul's concern? That we Gentiles somehow would become arrogant and entitled just like the Jews did. We need to see their branches broken off and fear the same fate. How easy it is for gifts to become entitlements.

I remember some years ago I had a flight somewhere and due to overbooking somehow, I got upgraded to first class. So I went on the plane before everyone else, opened my complimentary copy of that day's paper, selected a tasty pre-flight drink from the menu, and looked with disdain on the lower class passengers as they filed past me to their seats appropriately located in the rear of the plane. I was in front living life first-class and was very tempted to forget that I didn't pay anything to be there. By nature, I'm the same as the riffraff in the back. I'm only where I am by the grace of the airlines. I didn't deserve it.

This is the mark of the genuine Christian who continues to live by the grace of God. We must never forget that we are the people of God completely by the grace of God. This grace started centuries before us with purposes and promises made to Abraham. We are nourished and kept saved to this day by the sap of God's promises to the patriarchs. Our temptation is toward the snobbery of thinking we are somehow special in the story; uniquely wonderful Christians in all of history. We can think we are the roots and we nourish the tree. That is obnoxious arrogance and flat out wrong.

So, this text challenges us with two questions.

Are You in the Tree or in the Woods?

Have you been grafted in by faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Are you "all in" with Christ? Alive in him? We have trees around our house and every time there's a storm, the yard is filled with dead branches that fall off. As I pick them up, I often think of the spiritual parallel that the storms of life reveal who is spiritually alive and who is spiritually dead.

The alive ones remain in the tree; the dead ones are broken off. In terms of this biblical illustration, where are you? Out in the woods, a dead branch on the ground, or grafted and connected by faith in Jesus to the salvation given freely to all who believe? Could an illustration of a tree be the thing that God uses to graft you in? Trust in Jesus today.

Are You Entitled or Humbled by Your Place in God's Salvation?

Entitled people sit in church like they are in first class. Entitled people serve when it makes them look good or is convenient. Entitled people use the church for their own self-advancement. Grace-humbled Christians are thrilled to let God use them. Grace-humbled people are willing to take the place of least significance. Grace-humbled people remain astonished that someone like them is in the tree of God at all.

I shared in my *1 Bethelonians* email this week that we are sad to say goodbye to a family in our church, Don and Patti Eich (See below). They are moving to Texas to be near kids and grandkids. Fine. Clearly out of God's will, but OK.



I've spent a fair amount of time with Don. He has an incredible servant's heart. One thing about Don that I've always appreciated is often when he talks about his testimony—which includes years of addictions and plenty of sin into adulthood—and he describes God's work in his life, his eyes get red and he easily tears up. I always get the sense from Don that he still can hardly believe God would save someone like him.

Not everyone's a crier, but for anyone who finds themselves grafted by grace into God's tree of life, our hearts should tear up with wonder and gratitude. *O God, why would you save someone like me?*

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