

Chapter 53

Jews, Gentiles – and Faith

(Romans 11:17–22)

Despite Israel's fall into unbelief and sin, the nation is still 'holy' to God (11:16a). Once chosen, always chosen! God does not abandon his people, either nationally or individually. In verse 16b Paul says what he wants to say in the form of an illustration: *if the root is holy so also are the branches*. He is using the picture of an olive tree. ¹⁷*But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a 'wild olive branch', have been grafted in among them and are partakers of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not boast over the branches! And if you do boast you do not bear the root but the root bears you!* There are four parts to the tree and four questions we need to answer: who is the root? who is the trunk of the tree? who are the natural branches? who is the wild shoot?

(i) The entire olive tree represents Abraham and his children. It is not a picture of the earthly nation, Israel. This would imply that gentiles were grafted into Israel-the-earthly-nation and so became Jews. This is not true. The olive tree is the total family of Abraham. It is Abraham plus all the 'children of Abraham', all who in any sense look to Abraham as their father. (ii) The trunk of the tree is the spiritual heirs of Abraham, all who are truly God's people. (iii) The natural branches are the Jews. (iv) The wild olive branch represents gentile Christians. The whole picture with its four parts represents Abraham plus all who in any sense look to Abraham as their father.

1. **The starting point of God's people was Abraham.** Abraham is the 'first part' of God's people. Abraham is the 'root'. He was called by God's grace at a time when he was a pagan living in a pagan land (Joshua 24:2, 3). God gave Abraham promises (Genesis 12:1–3). Abraham came to faith and was justified by faith. The model of justification is Abraham. By persistent faith Abraham inherited the promises and the promises were confirmed to him **by oath**. Once the covenant oath was given the promises could not be lost. Abraham was 'holy' or specially set apart by God. His people were the 'seed of Abraham'. They too were special to God because of the promises given to Abraham concerning them. The trunk of the olive tree represents the elect 'children of Abraham' from Abraham onwards, the 'inner' Israel of Romans 9:6. The people of God are one because all believers are 'children of Abraham'.

2. **The 'natural branches' are the physical descendants of Abraham and his people.** They are the people of Israel, the earthly nation. Throughout the years some of them have been true believers but some have not. As time went on there were fewer and fewer true believers in the nation of Israel. At the time of Jesus' coming the bulk of 'Israel', the nation, did not respond with faith. Paul says, 'some of the branches were broken off'. The removal of some of the 'natural branches' refers to Israel's temporary loss of the kingdom of God through unbelief. 'The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit', said Jesus (Matthew 21:43). For the moment Israel's obvious experience of God's blessing at a national level has ceased.

3. **Gentile Christians must be careful not to make the same mistake as Israel.** The 'wild olive shoot' represents gentile Christians. They do not descend from Abraham at all. They were never an original part of God's olive tree, Abraham and his seed. They have been grafted in and are partakers of the rich root of the olive tree. They have become Abraham's children by

faith. The Christian church was at first a remnant of Jews; then gentiles were added into it. There is only one way of salvation. Nationality was never the important matter. What brought salvation was God's grace and being led to faith in Jesus. The whole picture represents the children of Abraham by grace and by God's calling. Obviously gentiles are not grafted into Abraham's people by way of anything physical or biological. They are implanted into Abraham's people by God's choice, by being brought to faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit. God promised that Abraham would be the father of **many** nations, not simply the father of one nation.

In Romans 11:18 Paul turns to give a word of warning to gentile Christians. Apparently some Roman Christians were saying something like this: 'God has finished with the Jews. It is now the gentiles who are God's holy people.' There was a danger of gentile pride. ¹⁹*You will say then, 'Branches were broken off in order that I may be grafted in!'* ²⁰*Quite so! They were broken off by unbelief, but you stand by faith. Do not be conceited but fear.* Gentiles did not come into God's people just because they were gentiles. They came in because in God's mercy they came to faith in God's Saviour. If a generation of **unbelieving** gentile church-members arise, God will put them out also! ²¹*For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you!*

Paul's warning was remarkably prophetic. How arrogant 'Christendom' has been, every bit as arrogant as the Jews of Jesus' day. Just as national Israel stumbled over Jesus, so today we live in a world where what is thought of as 'the Christian west' has stumbled over Jesus as much as ancient Israel ever did. But gentile Christians were never the 'pioneers' of salvation (11:18b). Gentiles were favoured only by Israel's foolishness (11:19–20a). Only faith will preserve their future as God's people. Gentile Christians are not in any position to be boastful over against Israel. If the next generation of gentile 'Christians' make the same mistake as the Jews they too will be put out of 'the olive

tree', the true people of God. They have to relate to God himself. ²²*Behold, then, the kindness and the severity of God. Upon those who fell there is severity: but upon you there is kindness – if you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.* There were no special privileges in the kingdom just because people descended from Abraham. There will be no special privileges among the professing Christians at Rome either! Salvation is not by nationality; it is not by physical descent from godly parents. None of this has anything to do with individuals losing a salvation which they once experienced; it rather has to do with a community which is known as Christian but in which a generation of unbelievers arises.

Behold, then, the kindness and the severity of God. We note that God's kindness is mentioned before his severity. Kindness is on offer; severity is the alternative. God was kind to Israel. Only when many generations had arisen which had become deeply rebellious did God's severity remove them from 'the olive tree'. Now many gentiles too have experienced God's kindness. Let them not repeat Israel's mistakes.