

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Romans 10:13-24**  
**“Lessons From An Old Olive Tree”**

February 5, 2017  
(5<sup>th</sup> Sunday After The Epiphany)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

VIC. ROMANS 11:13-24 "LESSONS FROM AN OLD OLIVE TREE"

Broken Off = Hardened

C. 11:13-36 PAUL'S DESIRE FOR HIS DIVIDED PEOPLE, PART III.

God Will Have A Faithful Bride, p.v. = Passive Voice

1) vv.13-14 Thesis: Paul Magnifies His Gentile Ministry = Make Jews Jealous To Save Some.

First Direct Address To Gentiles, "You," //v.24, Warned Not To Boast

- 13a Now (*de*) I am speaking to "you Gentiles" (pl). 1:5, 13, 10:1, 15:16-18, Gal. 1:16, 2:7-9, 1 Cor. 9:20-23  
 b To the extent that I am an "apostle to the Gentiles," I magnify (honor) my ministry Agreement With Peter, Jerusalem  
 14 in order to make my flesh (fellow Jews) jealous, and thus **save** some of them. //10:19, 11:2, Dual Concern, Join Us!  
 Why Is *Our* God Treating Gentiles So Good?

2) vv.15-24 Elaboration And Explanation On The Thesis: Branches Broken Off, Grafted In.

Salvation Of Gentiles & Jews Is Inseparable: One People

a) vv.15-24 Reason/For: Question, Part And Whole: Fruits And Tree. If (Since) → Therefore

Rejection Is Probationary, Inclusions: For, 2 If's, Question\*

- 15a 1a For *if* their rejection (of Messiah?) means the reconciliation of the world, vv.15-16//vv.23-24 = 2 If's, Bracket For's  
 b Q what will their acceptance (of Messiah?) mean but life from the dead? //11:11-12, Lesser To Greater 1, Resurrection  
 Sub. Gen., Reject Jesus + A Form Of Death  
 16a b If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, 2 Examples: Part/Whole, Believing Jews? Num. 15:19-20, Jer. 11:16-17  
 so is the whole lump; Num. 15:19-21, Jer. 2:3, Principles Applies To Olive Tree: Image For Israel  
 b and if the root is holy, Introduces Controlling Image = Root & Branch  
 so are the branches. Two Arguments To The Whole Of Israel  
 Jer. 11:16-19, Hos. 14:5-6 (Image), Metaphor Developed  
 17 2a But (*de*) *if* some of the branches were broken off, p.v. Unproductive, Story From Image  
 and you (sg.) a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among them to share the richness of the olive tree, p.v.  
 18 do not boast over the branches. Hortatory, Jews/Gentiles Now Have Equal Status Before God  
 If you (sg.) do boast, //2:17-29 Argues Against Jewish Boasting  
 remember it is not you that support the root, After 49AD, Claudius' Expulsion Of Jews/Jewish Christians  
 but the root that supports you. Abraham As Root, Ongoing Gentile Debt To Jews; We Came Second!  
 Genre = Speech In Character, Quotation + Correction  
 19 b You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quotes Them, Diatribe Form  
 20a That is true (*kalos*). No Supercessionism! Replacement Theology  
 b They were broken off because of their unbelief (*a-pistia*), Unbelief Is Judgment  
 but you stand fast only through faith (trust, *pistei*). No Complacency(vv.20-21) + No Despair(v.23)  
 c So do not become proud, Pride = Danger Of Gentiles Who Come To Faith  
 but stand in awe (fear). Gentiles Get In On God's People, God's Amazing Mercy  
 For = Reason For Fear  
 Natural = Ethnic Israel  
 21 2'a For *if* God did not spare the natural (*kata physin*) branches, Warning! Equal Treatment, No Protection v. Consequences  
 neither will he spare you. Argues Here From Greater To Lesser  
 22a b Note then the kindness Two Attributes Of God: Both At Same Time  
 and the severity of God: The Father Is Committed To The Son, Defends Him  
 b severity toward those who have fallen, 11:11, *Stumbling Stone*, Resistance Has Consequences  
 but God's kindness to you, Continuing Reliance, Or Relationship Broken From Our Side  
 provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. Wow! Eternal Security?  
 Ps. 31:19, Perseverance In Relationship Is Required  
 23a 1'a And (*de*) even the others, *if* they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, p.v., All Is Conditional Judgment  
 b for God has the power to graft them in again. Miracle! Door To Repentance Always Open, Analogy Fails  
 Lesser To Greater Argument (v.12//v.24): Inclusion//11:12  
 24a b For *if* you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, D.A., *Wild, Untended Olive* = Gentiles Who Believe  
 and grafted, contrary to nature (*para physin*), into a cultivated olive tree, grafted (4x), God As Owner  
 b Q how much more will these natural branches Cut Off/ Grafted In/Not Discarded(vv.17, 19, 20-23, 24 [order reversed])  
 be grafted back into their own olive tree? //vv. 13-14, For, 2 If's, Question, Save/Graft, Address you  
 Lesser To Greater 2, Even More Wondrous, Game Remains Open!

U.M. Articles Of Religion, Article XII: Of Sin After Justification

Why Repentance Is Always An Option, Except In One Particular And Extreme Case.

1. "Not every sin willingly committed after justification is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Stumble  
 2. Wherefore, the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification. Christian Realism  
 3. After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, Real Possibility  
 and, by the grace of God, rise again and amend our lives. Power Of God's Grace

Two Errors and Wrong Practices That Deny Our Teaching.

1. And therefore they are to be condemned who say they can no more sin as long as they live here; Premature Perfection  
 2. or deny the place of forgiveness to such as truly repent." Pastoral Condemnation

### **A Brief Treatment Of Romans C. 11:13-24**

As noted, Roman 9-11 is an essay dealing with larger Israel (i.e. Jew + Gentile) in relationship to Christ and Scripture. Believing Jews and Gentiles are the Israel of promise that traces back to Abraham. The three panels (A. 9:1-33, B. 10:1-11:12, C. 11:13-36) have the same outline (1. **Thesis** [9:1-2//10:1-2//11:13-14], 2. **Elaboration** [9:3-13//10:3-17//11:13-24], 3. **Diatribes + Scripture** [9:14-32//10:18-11:12//11:25-36]). Our text (C1. vv.13-14, C2. vv.15-24) is the Thesis and Elaboration of Panel C. That vv.13-14 begins a new panel and fresh statement of the thesis is signaled by direct address, “you Gentiles”/“Brethren” (11:13a//10:1) and a reference to Jewish salvation (*saved*, 10:1//11:14). That Paul addresses Gentile pride over Jews, against whom there was much animosity in the Empire, is indicated in the argument. He begins with a call, “Now I am speaking to *you Gentiles*.” While his commission is to them, his hope is also that fellow Jews note God’s kindness to outsiders and it stirs them to envy in order that *some* may be reawakened and saved. To be *saved* in the full sense is to be found among God’s people at the end. Paul is not speaking of individuals but of two large groups: 1) Jews and 2) Everyone else.

The Elaboration (C2. vv.15-24) has a 4:2 structure (1. vv.15, 16, 2. vv.17-18, 19 // 2' vv.21, 22, 1' vv.23, 24) with each section having two parts (1ab, 2ab//2'ab, 1'ab). Four alternating particles clue us to divisions in the argument (*For/gar* [v.15a], *But/de* [v.17a], *For/gar* [v.21a], *And/de* [v.23a]). The inclusions of 1//1' are: *For* (v.15a//vv.23b, 24a), a *question* (v.15b//v.24), a double *If* (vv.15a, 16a//vv.23a, 24a), and a *lesser to greater* argument (v.15 [implied], v.24b [explicit]). The center deals with branches *broken off* and *grafted in* (2. vv.17-18, 19) and with branches that *continue in his kindness* or are *cut off* (2' vv.21, 22). A command to *fear* (v.20c) and a reminder of divine *severity* (v.22b) are antidotes to pride.

Jewish resistance opens the way for Gentiles; this is *the reconciliation of the world* (v.15a), a large claim! And if Jews reawaken to Messiah in God’s time, is it not *life from the dead*, and how much greater is that (v.15b)? The two parts of this section are a question (v.15a) and double analogy: dough to lump, root to branch (v.16). Since some Jews now trust Christ, they are *first fruits* and by anticipation show what the whole loaf will be, which is *holy* (v.16a). With Abraham as root (v.16a), all that properly grows from him shares his way of being right with God by trust (v.16b), not independent performance of the law. First fruits and root are in continuity with loaf and tree. The image of root and branches (v.16b) is developed into an allegory in 2. vv.17-20// 2' vv.21-22, with conclusions in 1' vv.23-24.

Olive groves were tended, and Israel’s God—as indicated by the passive (e.g. *were broken off*, *were grafted in*)—is the agent. Pruning and splicing are normal, though the splice is normally from cultivated to wild since wild olives produce poor fruit. Surprise one! How easy it is for Gentiles to enjoy the richness of the olive and forget that root supports branch, not the reverse. They’ve been grafted into native stock and need to keep it in mind; they are now immigrants. It’s true that Jewish rejection (*broken off*) enabled Gentile entry (*grafted in*), but the deepest issue is not ethnic rivalry but trust in Christ or the lack thereof. No pride, much gratitude! The right stance is *fear* before God (v.20c) and his amazing work of grace

The argument continues in the next part (2' vv.21, 22) and begins with *For/gar*. That God is no respecter of persons but consistent in the dual attributes of *kindness* and *severity* is the intent of v.21, “For if (since) God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you!” The example is *severity* to resistant Jews and *kindness* to receptive Gentiles, but it is a *kindness* that calls for continued trust, or else *you too will be cut off*. To extend the analogy, I’m an import subject to deportation. We never move beyond active trust in Jesus because he’s utterly trustworthy. The Father is committed to one thing, the reputation of the Son, and whether or not I trust him determines present and future. A second violation of the analogy is that broken off, dead limbs may be raised. *To persist in unbelief* is to stay dead, but if—by a miracle of grace—eyes and ears are opened and trust enlivened, God grafts them back in (v.23)! The door to life is open. Gentiles are wild olives, uncultivated by God. For them to be grafted in, contrary to custom, is wonderful, but how much more when Jews return to one of their own as Messiah?

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## LESSONS FROM AN OLD OLIVE TREE

*"... remember that it is not you that support the root,  
but the root that supports you."*

No one stands on his own shoulders.

R O M A N S 1 1 : 1 8 b

**T**he pulpit committee sat stiffly on the front row of the sanctuary. The chairman asked the young candidate, "Son, do you know the Bible?"

"Yes, sir," the young man said as he sat up straight, "I know the Bible."

"What part do you know best?"

"Well, Sir," he said, "I know the New Testament best."

The chairman nodded, "Why don't you just tell us something you know? Tell us the story of the Prodigal Son."

"All right," said the young man as he took a deep breath:

"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus who went down to Jericho by night, and he fell upon stony ground, and the thorns choked him half to death.

The next morning, Solomon and his wife, Gomorrah, came by and carried him down to the ark for Moses to take care of him. But as he was going through the eastern gate into the ark, he caught his hair in a limb, and he hung there for forty days and forty nights. And after that he hungered, and the ravens came and fed him.

The next day, the three wise men came and carried him down to the dock, and he caught a ship to Nineveh. There he found Delilah sitting on a wall, and he said, "Chunk her down, boys."

They said, "How many times shall we chunk her down? Til seven times seven?"

And he said, "Nay, but until seventy times seven." So they chunked her down four hundred and ninety times. She burst

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asunder in their midst, and they picked up twelve baskets of the fragments. And in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?"

The chairman sat a minute with an intense look on his face. He then said, "Fellows, I think we ought to call him as our new preacher. He's young, but he really knows his Bible."<sup>1</sup>

*Bible* is from the Greek word for book—*Biblion*. Sixty-six separate books bound together as one, a library in a single volume. Two Testaments, the much longer Old of thirty-nine books from the Jews, and the shorter New of twenty-seven books from Jews who believed Jesus was the one they'd been waiting for, the Messiah, especially since his resurrection from the dead was the Lord God's ultimate seal of approval. God's Son sent to us, our Messiah revealed and rejected, one of a kind, prophet and priest and king, Jesus of Nazareth, the one to whom it all pointed and from whom it all now flows as if narrowing down to one and the opening up to all the world.

And while not all agree, the church sees these sixty six contributions as yielding a single story line, a large drama in three acts: Creation, Crisis, and then Re-creation or Salvation. And when I want a more detailed summary of the larger plot I used *the eight C's* as follows: the Creation, the Crisis of Sin and Satan, the Covenant with Abraham and his offspring the Jews, the Call of the Prophets, the Coming of Christ, the Church across the ages, and finally the Second Coming of Christ and the Climactic end of history as we know it, which opens up into the kingdom of God which is creation and God's people more than fully restored. And here God's people, Jewish and Gentile believers, will be gathered by the Father around the Son in the light of the Holy Spirit in a fully healed creation, and then the cosmic party begins, never to end but only get better all the time, which is why we all require resurrection bodies for its serious joys. Another outline of the same basic story line is the Apostles' Creed which goes from Creation through Christ to Consummation. The Bible is one large sprawling story of who God is and what God's done to create himself a people on whom to lavish his favor and through whom to express his good purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> [genebrooks.blogspot.com/2012/08](http://genebrooks.blogspot.com/2012/08).

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**Romans 11:13-24. . . . . 6**

It's a big book, a complex story, a treasury of God's truth and grace, and when read with the church across the ages it is divine glue to make us sticky to God. It is not to be worshiped because it is not God or a handy substitute; it is to be heard and read and meditated upon and honored and studied and sung and prayed and understood and obeyed and preached since in it is the record of God's self-revelation and the written substance of our faith.<sup>2</sup> It is very hard to read it and go wrong, and those who dare open in for any reason are liable to be greeted by its divine author. Behind the pages and the ink is the Triune God.

But if I had only one image to use, what would I do to communicate the big story of the Holy Book? I would take you to Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives there to observe specimens that are among the oldest olive trees in the world, determined by carbon dating in 2012 to be around nine hundred years old.<sup>3</sup> Not the trees of Jesus' day, but perhaps their grandchildren. I've been there, and they're beautiful, as if the twists and turns of the ages were sculpted into their gnarled trunks. And why the olive? Because it was a symbol of God's people used by Jeremiah<sup>4</sup> and Hosea,<sup>5</sup> not as common as the vineyard, but still useful.<sup>6</sup> It was the image Paul chose to help his Roman hearers understand what God was doing with Jewish root stock and Gentile grafts in their day, and once

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<sup>2</sup> See the U.M Confession of Faith, Article IV, The Holy Bible: "We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation" (*The Book of Discipline 2012*: 71).

<sup>3</sup> [www.jpost.com/Features/Magazine-Features/Olive-trees-of-Gethsemane-among-oldest-in-world](http://www.jpost.com/Features/Magazine-Features/Olive-trees-of-Gethsemane-among-oldest-in-world).

<sup>4</sup> 11:16-19.

<sup>5</sup> 14:5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 11:16-19, Hosea 14:5-6.

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you see the picture, it will stick in your mind, which is why Paul chose it.<sup>7</sup>

The roots of the tree are Jewish history beginning with Abraham who put his trust in the One who called his name and uttered amazing promises about him being the father of a new nation that would bless the world.<sup>8</sup> The trunk is holy history since that time, and the branches are where the fruit is found. Those branches who share Abraham’s DNA through Isaac but not his trust in the God of Jesus are being pruned, and- at the same time- something odd is happening. Wild olive shoots, the green shoots of outsiders, of former pagans, are being grafted into the cultivated stock of Israel to become part of its life.<sup>9</sup>

### TURNING TO THE TEXT

The church in Rome in the late 50's for the first century was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles who had come to trust in the risen Jesus and were now working out their lives together in the new reality of the body of Christ. They were learning how to love one another across a religious and cultural divide, since there was so much entrenched anti-Judaism abroad in the Empire.<sup>10</sup> And while there were certainly Jewish hearers when the letter was read in the house churches, in verse 13 Paul calls out his Gentile hearers with a direct address, “Now I am speaking to *you Gentiles*,” all of which had once been worshipers of the god and goddesses of the Roman Pantheon. They now worship the God of the Jews through his Son Jesus; what a turn around that must have been— to now see your former deities as hostile demonic powers bent on your destruction.

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<sup>7</sup> For a chart of comparisons, see the Appendix at the end of this manuscript, page 16.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 12:1ff.

<sup>9</sup> See A.G. Baxter and J.A. Zeisler, “Paul And Arboriculture: Romans 11:17-34,” *JSNT*, 24 (1985), 25-32.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the historian Tacitus (*Histories* 5.1) says that “the customs of the Jews are base and abominable and owe their persistence to their depravity” (Michael Bird, *Romans: The Story of God Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016], 388).

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**Romans 11:13-24. . . . . 8**

And here Paul reveals that he's always working on two fronts at once. His apostolic commission is the "apostle to the Gentiles," to reach non-Jews of all sorts, which explains his missionary journeys and letter writing. That's his prime portfolio, but his hope is that as outsiders come to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, his fellow Jews will notice God's extraordinary kindness and be moved to envy the riches their old enemies are now receiving from their God, and that they may want the same and be opened to the message about Jesus.

Let's say a Father's adult children are alienated from him for some reason. The Father then adopts a child of another race, say, and dotes on him. The kids wonder, "Why's he treating *this outsider* with such care when he's not even one of us? Maybe there's something about our dad we don't know?" That's the dynamic here. As Gentiles enter God's favor, how can the Jews not notice?

For Paul, the big issue was not wealth or power or status or security or fame: the stuff that consumes our culture. It was knowing God because you'd been brought back into relationship with him through Christ. That was the big thing, and the word for that is *saved*: saved *from* something that distorts life; saved *for* something—rather someone— who restores life. This was his heart, and with every conversation on the road or at his work bench or in the synagogues where he often started his preaching, this was his mission.<sup>11</sup> He'd been changed when he was wrong,<sup>12</sup> and he now wanted that same mercy for the Gentiles, the wild olive trees who'd never been tended or cultivated.

God still has such people who are de-toxed from the obsessions of the world to focus their hearts on something different. Now we are all responsible to live out and share our faith with others as witnesses. But for some, it goes deeper. And we call these people *evangelists*, *good news tellers*, and they are the obstetrical ward of the church; they aid people in the process of being *born again*. It's their spiritual specialty, their spiritual gifting. Glenn Williams does it through ministry with the poor on their homes, Kit Adkins through the food pantry and prayer filled friendships, Howard Thomes through street ministry and

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<sup>11</sup> On his method of identification, see 1 Cor. 9:20-23.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 9:1-31.

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**Romans 11:13-24. . . . . 9**

giving away bicycles and doing several Bible studies a week with homeless men and addicted women. All the other spiritual gifts are equally necessary, but this is what the gift of evangelism looks like at ground level at our door step in 2017. And if you hang around them, you may begin to see the world through their eyes, because to them everyone matters ultimately, “This soul matters to God.” Some see the forest; they the trees. I’m only telling you what we all know.

Father John Vianney, now sainted, was a rather unpromising French priest when he began early in the nineteenth century. He’s now considered by Catholics as the patron saint of parish ministers. And where he served in the little town of Ars, everything was changed because of what came through him. Ten of thousands of pilgrims a year came for confession, and to each he applied the medicine of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> What made him such a force was his desire to see lives and the turf they inhabit transformed, in his own words:

~~“My God, grant me the conversion of my parish. I am willing to suffer for my few converts in my parish, but yes even for a hundred years am I prepared to endure the sharpest pains; only let my people be converted. My God, convert my parish.”<sup>14</sup>~~

Do you know someone who needs to be saved? What are you doing about it? Or is it you who needs to be saved? It can happen today, as another sinner looks you in the eyes and says those amazing words, “The body of Christ given for you.” Do you have questions? Bring them to me; it’s my job.

So Paul has a passion for Gentiles and Jews to understand and embrace what the God of the Jews has done for the world in Jesus, for them to be one people around a new center. But Paul’s experience now for twenty-five years is that outsiders are more open than insiders, that pagans are more eager to know the God of the Jews and his Son than Jews are to know their surprising Messiah. Many have a mindset that says keeping the law sets them right with God. But no one can do that since all are debilitated by the disease of Sin, and so being

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<sup>13</sup> For a summary of his remarkable life, see “John Vianney,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\_Vianney.

<sup>14</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Romans 11:13-24.

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**Romans 11:13-24. . . . . 10**

right with God on the basis of performance is an illusion; it can't be done. But the right way to be right with God is through radical trust, through trust based on evidence as validated internally by the Holy Spirit, just like our Father Abraham, who was a pagan when God first called him.

Some of God's first family continue to trickle in, but most are now highly resistant: eyes and ears closed, hearts hardened, thinking a crucified and risen Messiah is a foolish deception and a dangerous distraction. And that is the divide to this day. We disagree on the answer to the most basic question: Who is Jesus, and why does he matter?

So here is Paul's insight into the Bible's biggest story. God saved and formed himself a people, the Jews, as his showcase to a lost world. It took a long time for the cradle to be built, but at the right time Jesus filled Mary's virginal womb and then Joseph's wooden cradle; the Messiah was now among them, a helpless little baby, hidden for three decades in a northern red neck village, then suddenly launched by the Holy Spirit into the public limelight. After three years of this upstart, the powers had quite enough of him— thank you— and together did him in, Jerusalem elites handing him over to Roman powers and a cruel cross for the most painful and shameful of deaths.<sup>15</sup> And so it ended on a cross and in a borrowed tomb, so he can't be the Promised One, can he? Well No, not unless his tomb was not the end but rather a temporary resting place and prelude to a big surprise, his solitary resurrection from the dead as confirmed by multiple, diverse appearances to individuals and crowds, to women and men, to skeptics and followers.<sup>16</sup>

And if it happened— which eyewitnesses of his appearances claim it did, and if the God of the Jews was the graverobber— and who else could it be? then despite the fact that he did not match the profile for what most Jews were looking for in a Messiah, Jesus is *the man*, the only one God has ever so

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<sup>15</sup> For a fresh read, see N.T. Wright, *The Day The Revolution Began: Reconsidering The Meaning Of Jesus' Crucifixion* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

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vindicated, the Jewish Messiah for the whole world.

And so when many of his own said No for all sorts of reasons, where were the energies of the church to go? And the answer is, “To all the nations,” and so they did with Paul leading the way as “apostle to the Gentiles.” Rather than continue to focus on the resistant few, the church went to the receptive masses, while always leaving the door open to Jews who were drawn to Messiah Jesus. Their resistance, their unbelief and lack of trust in what we claim God did in Jesus, opened the way for a world mission that continues. And if, in the future as promised, they soften again, it will be as if God raised them from the dead as well, and this is what Paul celebrates in the question of verse 15, “For if their rejection (of Messiah Jesus) means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance (of Messiah Jesus) mean but *life from the dead?*”<sup>17</sup> A trickle now, a flood of Jews later when the Holy Spirit lifts the veil.<sup>18</sup>

The Bible’s big story is that God is still working to claim himself a people from every piece of the human mosaic, which is what the word *catholic* means, “according to the whole,” all the ethics— every tribe and tongue. Whosoever will may come in, but through one door only: simple trust in Jesus Christ based on real evidence as illumined by the Holy Spirit. And after a long time of resistance, some of it the church’s fault, some of God’s first people, whom he has preserved across history in spite of horrible suffering— most recently the Holocaust— will rediscover Jesus and embrace him as their own. Jew and Gentile as one people around Jesus is God’s plan, and it will happen, but it is not something we cause. The creation of receptivity is not up to us but up to God, and God has no trouble creating curiosity in odd places.

And this is where the image of the olive tree is helpful. But before he turns to the olive as a whole, Paul gives us two word pictures to set up our thinking. It was customary for Jews, as one of their offerings, to present dough, a piece of the whole as an offering, the idea being that if the part was dedicated,

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<sup>17</sup> On this reading, see Frank J. Matera, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 267.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.

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**Romans 11:13-24. . . . . 12**

so was the whole.<sup>19</sup> The tithe is a token that the whole belongs to God, and so if some of the Jews, then and now, have put their faith in Jesus, it tells us what the whole will be. It will look just like the part; Jews who come to Jesus will be saved. The second image is the olive itself, and at the root is the exemplary trust of Abraham who was not set right with God because of performance but by trust, by self-abandonment to One who called him. And if there's life in the root, so with the branches; only those who share his trust are his true children.

So for the image to teach what Paul desires, he brings in God who is the owner and horticulturist, the one with the perfect right to prune and splice. And so when Paul used the passive voice “*were* broken off” and “*were* grafted in,” the one doing both is God, not a hired hand. God is always at work on his people, pruning the limbs that share Abraham’s DNA but not his path of trust, and— at the same time— grafting in wild olive shoots, that is receptive Gentiles who’ve said Yes to Jesus, to share in the rich life that come up from the deep roots of Abraham, because in the end only those who share Abraham’s faith— be they Jew or Gentile— can be God’s olive tree.

God lays out the evidence for his Son in the public square, a real man of history with four gospels as windows onto one extraordinary life, and the questions are: Who is this Jesus? and What’s he done? and Why does it matter? and Is he available today? And when the evidence is considered, and when the Holy Spirit shines light within to give the evidence meaning and persuasion, people still have a choice. Yes or No? Shall I trust this Jesus, or shall I withhold my faith? And if Yes, then they are newest splice into God’s old olive tree. And if No, then no new life, at least not yet.

Now the problem in the Roman church, and that Paul addressed it means it was an issue, is that *new sprout* Gentiles got the impression God was through with the Jews in their favor. But in the image, the grafts rely on the root, not the reverse, as Paul made clear in verse 18, “... remember, it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.” All us Gentiles, all us non-Jews, when we come to Jesus, become spiritual Jews. A new graft says, “Look at me!” and

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<sup>19</sup> Numbers 15:19-21.

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**Romans 11:13-24. . . . . 13**

Paul says, “No. Look at the root.” No room for anti-Judaism in Paul’s churches, either in its ancient or modern varieties.<sup>20</sup> We do not replace them; we get in on who they were always meant to be!

A second caution to Gentile Christians is to remember the criterion for pruning and splicing. It’s all about trust in Jesus, so only God knows where to prune and what to splice, as in verse 20, “They were broken off because of un-trust, of un-belief, but you stand fast only through trust.” So don’t get puffed up. Instead, fear God, because the very same thing could happen to you. God is both kind and severe because the Father is only committed to one thing, and that is the honor of the Son Jesus, his fame, his worth, his reputation, and so the Father’s commitment to any human being is secondary, derivative. Where you stand with Jesus determines where you stand with the One who sent him, and that is the sole basis of pruning and splicing, in or out, included or excluded.

Paul is clear. The Father takes a severe stance to those who think *Jesus is not trustworthy* and a kind posture towards those who say *Jesus is trustworthy*. And the challenge of the new life we receive is to never veer away from trust but only to go deeper in the face of challenges. We can persevere and continue in faith because God’s aid is always near; and Yes, there are ups and downs, some of them severe, but whatever happens, the question remains: Is Jesus trustworthy? And those who find him so answer *Yes he is*.

Now there are at least two places the olive tree analogy breaks down, and the first is that the grafting process is reversed. The typical pattern was to graft superior cultivated stock into inferior wild stock to improve the fruit, but here Paul reverses the logic because God wants Gentiles in the family. And secondly, branches that are broken off are dead. They do not qualify as grafts; it’s impossible. But not if God is the keeper. The one who raised Jesus can raise anyone who *stops believing in their unbelief* and places whatever small trust they have in Jesus. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who’s been pruned can again be restored by the One who both spiritually– and ultimately physically– raises the

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<sup>20</sup> On the cultural and emotional process that led up to the Nazi vision of a *world without Jews*, see Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

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**Romans 11:13-24. .... 14**

dead. How kind is God to splice Gentiles into his tree; we get in! How much more wonderful when the natural branches, once broken off, come back to life.

God will have a faithful people; that is the big story of the Bible, and it will be composed of all Jews who come trust in Jesus and of all the peoples of the world– all the languages and tribes– who trust in him as well.

**CONCLUSION**

One fine day in 1941, Violet Bailey and Samuel Booth were strolling the English countryside, deeply in love, engaged to be married. A diamond engagement ring sparkled on her finger.

Their bliss suddenly ended. One said something that hurt the other. An argument followed, then escalated. Violet pulled the ring from her finger and hurled it with all her might into the field. The ring sailed through the air and came to rest nestled under grass in a way impossible to see.

Violet and Samuel kissed and made up. They walked and walked the field hunting for the ring, but never found it. Two months later they married, had a child, eventually a grandson. Part of family lore was the story of the lost ring.

Violet and Samuel grew old together. In 1993 Sam died. Fifteen years passed, but the ring was not forgotten.

One day in 2008 Violet's grandson had a bright idea. Find the ring with a metal detector. So he bought one and went to the field where sixty-seven years earlier she'd hurled the ring. He crisscrossed the field, waving the detector over the grass. After two hours, there was a telltale beep; he'd found what he was looking for! Filled with joy, he then placed the diamond on the finger of his astonished grandmother. The diamond had finally come home.<sup>21</sup>

God is not through with his first family. We get in on their blessing through Jesus Christ. But the ancient root of Abraham will bear a final harvest among his own. They are coming home. Paul said so, and I trust him.

**Appendix**

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<sup>21</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Romans 11:13-24, originally "It wasn't all bad," *The Week* (2-15-08), 4.

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**Paul’s Olive Tree Image And Allegory  
(Possible Comparisons)**

<b>Gentiles</b>	<b>Jews</b>
Wild Olive Tree/Branches	Cultivated Olive/Tended By God
Source	Destination
Grafted In By God (p.v.)	Broken Off By God (p.v.)
Pruned/Removed If No Perseverance	Re-grafted If Freshly Responsive
Depends On The Root (Comes Later)	Is The Root (Call of Abraham)
Grafted In By Faith	Broken Off By Unbelief/Resistance
No Reason For Pride/Boasting, Dependent	No Reason For Despair, Door Is Open
May Also Be Broken Off: Open Issue	May Also Be Grafted Back: Open Issue
Requires Repentance + Trust + Perseverance	Requires Repentance + Trust + Perseverance
Needs Riches (sap/life)	Has Riches (sap/life)
Necessary Part Of God’s Israel	Necessary Part Of God’s Israel
Marvelous Event Of Kindness	How Much More! Life From The Dead!
Kindness Or Severity Based On Trust	Kindness Or Severity Based On Trust
Some, Though Not All Gentiles, Saved	Some, Though Not All Jews, Saved