



## One Tree

Romans 11:11-24

Rev. Fred Greco

---

Good morning. If you have your Bibles with you, I would encourage you to turn to the book of Romans. We're going to be looking this morning at a part of the second portion of Romans, chapter 11. We looked at the first part of chapter 11 last week. We're going to look at the second part of Romans 11 this week and next week, and then the third and final glorious conclusion to this chapter the week after that.

We are continuing this morning in chapter 11 where Paul is teaching that God has not rejected Israel. The occasion of chapters 9-11, as we have seen before, is the widespread rejection of the Messiah by the Jews. It seemed contradictory to every expectation. It was a surprise. It was unexpected to those who preached the gospel. Now Paul has given us reasons why this rejection did not mean that God's promises have failed. It has given him the occasion to teach about God's election and about man's responsibility.

In the first part of Romans, chapter 11, Paul tells us that Israel's rejection is not total. It is not complete. He points to himself, he points to others in their midst, and he points to the biblical principle of the remnant by grace to show that there has not been a total and complete rejection by the Jews, that God still has his remnant by grace, as he always has. Now in this second section, he tells us that the rejection of Israel is not final. It is temporary.

It is currently existing, but it is not only not complete and total; it is not final. God still has a purpose for Israel. He is not done with Israel. In doing this, Paul shows us the purpose of God with his people and who his people are. So, let's come then to our text. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word, because the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans 11, beginning at verse 11:

*“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? 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."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord, we ask this morning that you would uncover your Word for us. Lord, teach us from your Word. Teach us who you are. Teach us what you have done. Teach us what duty you require of us, and most of all, Lord, teach us of the Lord Jesus Christ. We long to see him. We long to be with him. So we pray that you would open him up to us in your Word. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We are now in this second portion of Romans, chapter 11, in which Paul is telling us, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that God is not done with Israel, that the rejection of the Messiah by Israel is not final, that there is still a future for Israel. So, from our text this morning, I would like us to see three questions answered.

First... *Why did Israel stumble?* Paul tells us that Israel has stumbled at the stumbling stone of Jesus Christ, and the question that comes first to us is... *Why did they stumble, then?* If it's not because their rejection is final, what is God's purpose in this? Secondly, we then would ask... *Who are the people of God?* Paul is talking about the Jews. He's talking about the Gentiles. He's talking about the people of God generally.

So, this text helps us to answer the question... *Who are the people of God?* Then, finally, as we look at a text that is several thousand years old and treats a problem that was occurring in Paul's day, even as it comes to us, we ask ourselves the question... *What does this mean for us?* So, then, why did Israel stumble? Who are the people of God? And what does that mean for us?

## **Why Did Israel Stumble?**

Let's start by looking at the question... *Why did Israel stumble?* Paul has two answers for us, one building upon another. The first answer he begins with is *so that salvation would come to the world*. Paul opens up this second section of Romans much like he opened up the first section of Romans 11. He asks a pointed question that expects a negative answer. It's actually the same formula we saw in Romans 11:1. It's very similar grammatically.

We might ask the question *this* way to get the feel of Paul's question: "They didn't stumble so they might fall, did they?" As you hear the question that way with that end of the question and the intonation of voice, you know the only answer that can be given is "No." We've seen this before. We know the same kind of question, because Paul has asked it with the same form earlier in verse 1, and he has given the same answer earlier in verse 1.

Once again, he answers with this phrase that should be now very familiar to us. The answer is "By no means! God forbid! May it not be!" "Don't even entertain the thought," Paul says. Paul says it's impossible to even consider that the answer to this question could be "Yes." That's what Paul says about whether Israel stumbled so they could fall.

Now let's get some clarity around this question. Paul's question relates to Israel's stumble. What does this mean here? Well, I think, conceptually, Paul is looking back to Romans, chapter 9, verse 30, and following. There he talks about Israel's stumbling at the stone of stumbling, that they pursued their own righteousness, so they did not succeed.

Chapter 9, verse 32: "They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling...'" This is not the exact same word used here in Romans 11:11, but it's very similar in its import. In chapter 9, it has more of a feeling of a physical stumbling, to stub one's toe, to trip. You know what that looks like, when you're walking in the house and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, a piece of furniture jumps out at you and you hit your foot and lose your balance. This is just something that happens. You hope you don't fall, but I think we're familiar with this.

In chapter 11, Paul uses a slightly different word that has that same physical stumbling or losing one's balance connotation, but it has an additional element built into it. It carries the meaning of making a mistake. Actually, it carries the meaning of sinning. The mistake is what causes you to stumble. If we can go back to our illustration, we all know that pieces of furniture don't jump out at us and trip us, but if you were in the home...

I'm sure this never happens in *your* home with young people, that they run in your home. You never do this, do you, young people? Good. But if you were, let's just say theoretically, and you were running and tripped over a piece of furniture, it wouldn't be the furniture's fault. It wouldn't even be an accident. It would be caused by your mistake. You would stumble because you were doing something you shouldn't be doing. That's the connotation of the word *stumble* here, but stumbling doesn't necessitate a fall.

Paul says, "Did they stumble in order that they might fall?" This word here for *fall* has the idea of a final fall that you can't get up from. At the risk of dating myself, I don't know if any of you remember that wonderful commercial from the 1980s for Life Alert in which there was an older woman who was on the floor of her bathroom, and she cried out, "Help! I've fallen and I can't get up."

You remember why this was so good for the product was the product's pitch was, "When you can't get up and you can't do anything for yourself, you press the button and we come and help you." That's what the fall was. It wasn't a fall you bounced back from. It was the kind of fall that was an end. Now, you younger people, if you're not sure what I'm talking about, search YouTube this afternoon. You'll find it.

What this means is a stumbling means to lose your footing, and anyone can stumble at any point. That's actually what James says in James 2. He says we can try to keep all of the law and yet stumble at one point. But the word *fall* here is much more final. It means to fall down, to fall to pieces, even to be destroyed. Ironically, it's the same word that's used in a passage that is perhaps the most quoted at weddings, 1 Corinthians 13. In 1 Corinthians 13:8 we read, "Love never ends" or "Love never fails."

It's the same word: *end* (fall), *fail* (fall). The idea is that love is never over and done with. Love is never the end-all, be-all. It never goes out of existence because of who God is. That's what *fall* here means. Paul's question is clear. Israel has obviously stumbled. They have not embraced their Messiah. Is that it for them? Is God done with them forever? Are they completely rejected? Of course, Paul answers this question dramatically and strongly. "No!" in the strongest of possible terms.

Now, as soon as we hear Paul answer that question, a second question comes to our minds. "If that's *not* the case, Paul, then why *did* they stumble? If they didn't stumble so they might fall, what is God doing here?" Paul answers that in the next portion of this verse. He begins with the word *rather*. This word *rather* is a strong adversative. Let me put that less grammatically for you. It's a really big *but*.

He says, "They didn't stumble so that they might fall, *but* there is a purpose here." He says, "Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous." Paul says that it is through Israel's trespass. He is picking up that same aspect of stumbling we just talked about, stumbling that would include sin or mistake or trespass, and he's saying that God has brought salvation to the Gentiles (in essence, to the world) through Israel's trespass.

It's very clear. Paul is saying that Israel has sinned. Paul is saying that Israel in his day *is* sinning. Paul is telling us now, as he speaks to us through the Scriptures, that Israel is sinning *now* in not embracing their Messiah. This is the same word that's used in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew. "Forgive us our trespasses." It's the same word Paul uses over and over again in Romans 5 to describe the trespass of Adam. It is clearly sin that is resulting in the salvation of God coming to the Gentiles.

What, then, does Paul mean about this? How can sin bring about good? We don't want sin, do we? How could sin be good? Well, the short theological answer is that that is exactly what God is in the business of doing: bringing good out of evil. God does not *do* evil, but he brings good *out* of evil. Perhaps the best example in all of the Bible, certainly in the Old Testament, is the story of Joseph. Joseph is wickedly treated by his brothers. They sin against him.

With sinful, wicked motives they determine to kill him, and then in great magnanimity of heart they decide not to kill him just to sell him into slavery for the rest of his life. Clearly, they were trying to hurt Joseph. Clearly, they were motivated by greed, by pride, by envy. They meant evil. Of course, God uses that evil for good...not just for Joseph, raising him up to second behind Pharaoh, not just for Joseph's family by saving them from the famine, but God means it for good for all of the known world.

You see, God can take evil and use it for good. This is critically important for us to understand, because we can't see all our ends. Have you...? I would say in the last month, but certainly in the last year, has something happened to you that you wonder what on earth God is doing to you? "Why did this sickness have to come on me? Why did that relationship have to fall? Why did I have to bear *this*? Why is God doing *that*?"

I'm not here to tell you that easily and every time you will know with a bow tied on it that everything bad that has happened to you is actually the best thing that has ever happened to you. That's not what I'm saying. What I *am*

saying is God is in the business of taking evil and making good out of it, so we shouldn't be surprised when we look back five years, ten years, or in glory and see what God did through the evil in our lives, how he did good for us and for others.

If I can put it *this* way, that is God's main occupation with sinful people. He turns their sin and wickedness into good. This is also historically true with the Jews. We see this throughout the book of Acts. In Acts, chapter 8, we see the persecution of the church. We see Paul breathing out threats and curses, Luke tells us, and the persecution is so bad the church is broken up. They're no longer able to worship together. They're no longer able to have fellowship. They lose their families. They go to distant areas. This is wickedness caused by the Jews.

But what happens as a result of it? in Acts, chapter 8, Luke tells us that Philip heads to Samaria where he just happens to meet other people, and he just happens to share the gospel with them, and they just happen to believe, and the gospel just happens to spread like wildfire throughout all of Samaria. Of course, you know none of that just happens. That's God using the wickedness of persecution to bring the gospel to Gentiles, to the Samaritans.

We see the same thing in Acts 13. Paul goes to the Jews, and we see this in verse 46. Paul and Barnabas come to the Jews, and they are rejected. The Jews reject Jesus. Paul says, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles." Because the Jews stumble and reject, salvation comes to the Gentiles.

We even see this among believing Jews, because the believing Jews had a hard time incorporating the Gentiles. They thought they needed to keep the law of Moses, to be circumcised, to keep the purification rites. The church in Acts 15 calls a council, and they lay forth what is required to be redeemed. The emphasis is all on faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel, then not just goes forth in numbers; the gospel goes forth with clarity. Why? Because of the stumbling of the Jews. What God has done is he has brought the kingdom, the gospel, his grace, to the Gentiles because the Jews have rejected it.

Now the next question is... *Why?* We might think it's just to be rid of the Jews, to move past the Jews because they've rejected the Messiah, but actually, it's something quite different. We might be tempted to just put the Jews aside and say something the equivalent of, "Well, if you don't want *me*, I don't want *you*. I'll find someone else who will appreciate me and my message," but that's not how God works. What he's actually doing, Paul tells us, is bringing the gospel to the Gentiles to make the Jews jealous.

When we first hear that, it's hard for us to understand, because when I say the word *jealous* you conjure up in your mind pictures of the green-eyed monster. We picture spouses who don't trust their other spouse. We picture people who don't have faith in each other, who are uptight, who are paranoid, but that's not what Paul means by *jealous* here. What he means is that God is bringing salvation to the Gentiles to make Israel see what they're missing. He's showing his grace to others so that Israel will not take it for granted.

Have you ever had the occasion to take something for granted until you saw someone else enjoying it? Perhaps you've been out to a meal. You go out to a meal with a friend or your spouse and happen to order the same food, and you were expecting something a little bit different. You were expecting it to be prepared differently or to have

different sauce or to have different spices, and you're thinking to yourself, "Well, I don't really want to bother with this. I'm not that hungry anyway."

The person you're with is devouring it. I mean, they're going full-on, knife-fork. You look at them and say, "What are you doing?" They say, "This is the best meal ever! What are you doing? Are you not going to eat yours?" "Well, I'm not..." "Then don't eat it. I'll take it. Wait till I'm done. I'll take yours too." Then you say to yourself, "I'd better try this, because they think it's really good, so maybe it's good. I don't want to miss out on something that's good. I'm reluctant, but the only thing worse than trying it and having it be bad is *not* trying it and having it really be the best thing ever. I'd better try this."

That's what God is doing in a spiritual realm here with the Jews and the Gentiles. This is remarkable. God is using the unbelief of Israel to restore Israel. Do you see the connection? Israel stumbles in verse 11, and then God uses their trespass to bring salvation to the Gentiles, and that makes Israel jealous. And what is the result of that jealousy? Paul tells us in verse 14. That Jews would be saved. Do you see God at work here? This is why Paul, a Jew of Jews, can magnify his ministry to the Gentiles.

Have you ever wondered why God made Paul the apostle to the Gentiles? I know when I first read the book of Acts, I didn't understand this. I didn't think God knew what he was doing, because here he took Paul, who would seem to be picture-perfect to be the apostle to the Jews... After all, he's a Pharisee. He was trained under Gamaliel. He knew the law. He knew how his opponents would think because he thought the same way.

So, why does God take Paul, the most Jewish of Jews, and send him as an apostle to pagan Greeks? It makes no sense at all... unless you understand what God is doing here in Romans 11. You see, by bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul is actually serving his people, the Jews. He knows God hasn't given up on them. We might put it *this* way, humanly speaking, very carefully.

If the Jews had not rejected Jesus, something different would have happened, but they *did* reject Jesus, so the result is the cross. The result is that salvation has come to the world, and you and I, then, are the beneficiaries of God's plan. As we look at this, this is not a happenstance. This is not God hoping things will work out and scrambling to make it work. This is all a part of the eternal plan of God. It happens exactly as he has purposed. This is what God has done.

Then Paul goes on to tell us that God is not done yet in verse 12. He says, "*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!*" Paul has just told us how wonderful it is for the world that the Jews have trespassed and stumbled. It means the riches of the world, and we can easily agree with that. After all, our salvation is a result of this. We are, in the main... virtually all of us... Gentiles. We are the recipients of God's salvation because of the failure and the stumbling of the Jews.

Also, if the gospel had not come to the Gentiles, think of what the world would be like. Think about America without the gospel. Think about Africa, Europe, or Asia without the gospel. Think about how different the world would be if the gospel was not a part of our world history speaking. There would be no hospitals. There would be

no universities. There would be no principles of human rights. All of these are derived from the gospel and from the church.

What Paul wants us to do is to counter our tendency to idolize the past. We all do this. We think things were better in the past, probably because we don't remember the past very well. We remember the good things about the past but not the bad. This happens all the time. Dads who are over 40, have you ever had a teenager come up to you and tell you how great a basketball player Kevin Durant is? If you haven't said, "Son, you never saw Michael Jordan. Do you have any idea how good Magic Johnson was...?"

If you're a little bit older than that, you would say, "Magic Johnson? How about Wilt Chamberlain? How about Elgin Baylor? How about Mr. Triple-Double? Come on." See, we all think something in the past is better than it is now. If we're not careful, this is our view of the church. We think it's our job to hold on by the edges of our fingernails because God is pretty much done with us...not completely, but our best days are behind us. "We'll never have days like the Puritans had. We'll never have days like the Reformers had. We'll never have a revival like the Great Awakenings. No. Those were all in the past."

What Paul is saying here is if you think what God has done in the past is great, you ain't seen nothin' yet. If failure is such a great blessing, can you imagine what success would look like? The word *failure* here, as Paul uses it, means defeat. It's the same word he uses in 1 Corinthians 6 where he describes when two Christians sue each other before a secular court. He says, "You're already defeated. You've already lost. I don't care who wins the lawsuit, because you are letting the world judge brothers. You should take the problem to the church. It's a defeat."

Instead of defeat here, Paul says, we can look forward to the full inclusion of Israel. There is indeed something better coming. This phrase is a word in Greek that means restoration or fullness. It's the same word we find in Colossians, chapter 1, describing how Jesus displays the fullness of the deity in bodily form. It is the complete restoration, the wholeness of Israel that we have to look forward to.

Paul repeats this and expands it in verse 15. He says, "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" What does that mean? If you're not sure what that means, join the club. There are charter members all over the place. Commentators are all over the place on this. Some think it refers to the resurrection. The only problem with that is if it refers to the resurrection, this is the only time that phrase *life from the dead* would be used referring to resurrection. It's often *arose from the dead* or *resurrected from the dead*.

We don't know what it means, at least precisely, but I think we can understand what Paul is saying in the big picture. Professor John Murray puts it this way, and I think it's well put: what we *can* know is that it is a "blessing far surpassing in its proportions anything previously obtained in the unfolding of God's counsel." Let me say that for you in a little bit less professor language. It is a blessing way beyond anything proportionally that anyone has ever previously obtained in the purpose and counsel of God. I don't know about you, but that's pretty good.

That's what we have to look forward to, Paul says. That means you and I must have a heart for Israel. Now I don't mean that in the political sense. I'm not here to tell you that you must vote for politicians who support the state of

Israel. You may or may not due to your own interests in geopolitics. I don't mean the state of Israel and their foreign policy and their laws. If I did, I would be telling you to endorse the persecution of Christians in Israel who are trying to preach the gospel.

We may not know that. Persecution in Israel is not as strong as it is in Muslim countries, but it's a close second. It follows the history. The Jews don't want people talking about Jesus. What I *do* mean is we must have a heart for the *people* of Israel, for the Jews, for their salvation, for them to embrace the gospel, to see the great blessings of God unfold.

Do you see how God's purpose and plan works? He designed the salvation of the Jews and the Gentiles so they work for each other. The Jews reject Jesus, so God sends his gospel to the Gentiles to make the Jews jealous to bring them to salvation, which then the salvation of the Jews brings great blessings to the Gentiles. It's as if they each help each other. God's provision of salvation. Why did Israel stumble? That salvation would come to the world and that more blessings would come to us.

### **Who Are the People of God?**

The next question we can ask and answer from this text is... *Who are the people of God?* Paul answers this by telling us that there is one people of God. We have been talking about Jews, we've been talking about Gentiles, and we have been talking generically about the people of God. So, then, who *are* the people of God? Is it Israel? Is it the Gentiles? Paul sets forward an exposition that shows us that there is but one people of God.

Usually, it is best to state theological and biblical points positively. That is, not to speak negatively about something else but to rather positively set forth your case, but sometimes we do have to speak negatively about other things to get clarity. The great Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it *this* way in order to correct error: "[The world says], 'Do not be negative; let us be positive; let us just preach the simple gospel.' But the Bible is full of negatives, full of warnings, ever showing us these terrible possibilities."

What we must understand is that there is a strong tendency in American Christianity to divide Israel and the church, to say that there are two peoples of God, to say that God had a plan for one people and it failed, so he came up with plan *B*, a second plan. This goes by the name of *dispensationalism*. It has been the de facto, broad theology in America throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is the theology of virtually every nondenominational church, of many Baptist churches, of Methodist churches, of Presbyterian churches.

The one real distinctive is virtually all dispensational theology is located in America. Now, there are very positive aspects to dispensational theology. Dispensationalists were among the strongest defenders of the inerrancy of the Word of God in the early twentieth century. They were the strong defenders of the deity of Christ. They are believers in the Bible. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ, so do not hear me saying that they are heretics damned to hell.

But I do wish to show you from Romans 11 that their views are not biblical in this aspect, because if I were to believe that there are two peoples of God, the people of Israel and the people of the Gentiles (the church), and that they're ever separate, then I would be denying the truth of Romans 11. So we have to be very careful here. Just

because a theology is common doesn't make it right. You know the old adage: common sense isn't very common. It's being aligned with the Scriptures that's important.

We can evaluate someone's teaching on two fronts. First, by the historic understanding of the church, and secondly, by the Bible. We need both of these to help us come to the right conclusion. After all, if we just look at the history of the church, we can fall into the same errors others have fallen into. We won't be grounded on the Word of God. We will be just going by the opinions of men. But if we try to just look at the Bible in a vacuum, we will miss what the Holy Spirit has been doing for centuries through the church.

Here's a news flash: the Holy Spirit has been at work for a long time before you picked up your Bible. He has been at work with Christians. He has been at work through the church, advancing the cause of Christ, building the kingdom of Christ. He has been doing this over the centuries. He has not been without a witness even in the darkest of days.

I think at times we think the teaching of justification by faith alone was completely lost for centuries, that the whole world was in darkness until Martin Luther alone discovered it and brought it back. Luther would tell you that's not true, that for centuries, for hundreds of years, there were those who taught the truth of the Scriptures, of justification by faith alone, even though they were being persecuted and killed by the church. That teaching was kept alive. Luther and the Reformers just brought it to preeminence again.

Now we also have to be very careful not to place our own understanding of the Bible as being ultimate. We don't know all things. That's why we have to look to the Bible primarily, but we also have to see how others have interpreted passages in the Bible so we can be sure our view is the biblical view. So, what is dispensationalism, and what does it teach? Dispensationalism was founded in the 1860s by a man by the name of J.N. Darby in England, and it was exported to America.

It really took off in 1909 with the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. I don't know if you're familiar with this. My very first Bible was a *Scofield Reference Bible*, so when I speak about dispensationalism, you must understand I *was* one. That *Scofield Reference Bible* was the Bible where I learned the truth of salvation and came to faith in Jesus Christ.

But in addition to the Bible, there were a whole bunch of footnotes in it that put together a very convoluted system that went something like this: God had a people, Israel, and God had given the law to them in the time of Moses, and what Israel should have done was said, "No, no, no. No, thank you, God. We don't want the law. We want to stay under grace. You keep your law. Give us grace." But they didn't do that. They said, "All of the things that are in the book of the law we will do."

The dispensationalists say that's the end right there. They gave up on grace, so now they're law. They don't know grace. Of course, they forget that Moses tells us in the book of Deuteronomy that when the Israelites said, "We will do all the things that are in the book of the law," God said, "You have well spoken all you have said." I don't know if God was fooled too.

So then what happens is Israel has accepted this "do this" principle. God then sent Jesus to establish his kingdom in Israel, and if Israel would have accepted Jesus as their Messiah, the kingdom would have been inaugurated right then, Jesus would have become the King, and there would have been no need for the cross, but they rejected Jesus, so God had to come up with a plan *B*. His plan *B*, which no one had ever thought of before and God hadn't purposed before, was the church.

The church had never been in existence before. It began then, and it was a parenthesis that will end when Jesus returns, and then the Israel kingdom will come back again. So, for all eternity we have the church separated from Israel. You may have heard this. One of the ways they describe it from a biblical image is the promise to Abraham was "Your descendants will be as numerous as the sand on the seashore (Jews) and the stars in the sky (the church), and they're just as far apart as the sky is from the beach."

Someday God will come back to Israel. Right now he's not dealing with Israel, and when he does, it will be separate than what he does for the church. This quickly became the majority report in American theology. Now why am I going on about this? Well, in the first place, if you listen to Christian radio, this is probably what you'll be taught. If you watch Christians on television, this is probably what you'll be taught, unless you're listening to Ligonier Ministries or something of that specifically Reformed bent.

That's not what Paul is teaching here in Romans 11. He's not teaching about two peoples of God. He's talking about the difference between Gentiles and Israel, and he's talking about all of the efforts that are made to bring them together, not keep them separate. He's talking about one salvation, one message, a blessing that comes from both.

Clearer of all of this is the illustration Paul uses in Romans 11 of the olive tree. I'm going to ask you a simple question that I hope virtually everybody in the room can answer. In Romans 11, how many trees are there? There's one. There's only one tree. There are different things happening to the tree (we'll get to that in a minute), but there's only one tree. Now if there were two peoples of God, how many trees would we expect to see? Two. But we just said there's only one.

What does that tell us? It tells us that Paul wants us to see there's only one people of God. Israel rejected Jesus, and as a result they stumbled. They trespassed, and that meant that salvation has come to the Gentiles. Paul describes this with his illustration of the tree in verse 17 and following. He says Israel that was a part of the natural, cultivated, original olive tree had its branches broken off. Now what happened then? Did the tree die? Did the tree cease to bear fruit? No, Paul says. He says the Gentiles were then grafted in. They were made a part of that same one tree from which Israel was broken off.

Now, what will happen to the Jews in the future? We'll look in more detail at that in the next two weeks in the following verses of Romans 11, but Paul tells us generally what is going to happen in verse 12 and verse 15. He says Israel will be grafted back onto the olive tree in verses 23 and 24. Israel will be saved, and they will be grafted back onto the one tree, the tree from which they were broken off, the tree which the Gentiles were grafted onto.

This is important for us. It's important because it helps us to see that the Old Testament and the New Testament make one Bible. It helps us to see that there is only one way of salvation God has. He doesn't have one way for Jews and one way for church members. It tells us God has one plan, one purpose, that God has one people. So don't be confused. It's actually very simple: one salvation, one plan, one people.

Paul also explains *why* there is only one people. He says it's because the one people of God are rooted in God's promises. He roots the people of God in the grace of God. He starts this in verse 16 with another illustration. I hope you appreciate Paul's illustrations, helping us to see these things in a very concrete way. He harkens back to Numbers 15 in which the Israelites would make bread. Any of you who have ever made bread know you have to put together flour and salt and egg and yeast and whatever you're going to put together and you make a bunch of dough.

Well, in Numbers 15, what's described is a portion of that dough is taken off. The *firstfruits*, Paul calls it. I know that's confusing, fruit and bread, but follow me here. He takes that first portion off, and it is dedicated to God. Then he says if that first portion is holy to God, the only way it *can* be is if the whole lump was holy too. Why? Where did the portion come from? The whole lump. If the whole lump wasn't holy, the first portion wouldn't be holy. Do you see what Paul is setting up here? We know that the lump is holy from the root or the fruit.

Paul then goes on to show it by talking about trees. He says if the root is holy, so are the branches. Now what does he mean by that? If you have a tree in your yard and the roots are bad and dead, what happens to your tree? Get out an ax. It's dead. It's not coming back. Right? But if the roots are strong, even if some of the branches are dead, what do you do? Do you chop down the tree? Of course not! You prune the tree. The tree is alive because the roots are alive. That's what Paul is saying.

So, what is this firstfruit? What is the root Paul is talking about? Well, it has to go back to something in Israel's past, because, after all, the root of the tree is the tree from which Israel was broken off, so it has to go back to Israel. But it also has to do with the Gentiles, because the Gentiles have been grafted onto that tree that has roots. So, what could that possibly be that would apply to both Israel and the Gentiles? It has to be the patriarchs. Specifically, it has to be Abraham and the promise God gave to him.

This makes sense, because the promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing to all the nations, that he would be a father of many nations, not just Israel. Paul has already told us in Romans, chapter 4, that everyone who believes on Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, has Abraham as their father. So the true support of God's people are not the branches but the root, the promises of God.

This is important, because we must resist all temptations to think that we are important and that we are in charge. We have to resist that it depends on us, that we're the ones carrying the ball forward, that we are the strength of the church. The Bible teaches us that the promises of God are the strength of the church, the foundation of our hope, our eternal life.

## What Does That Mean for Us?

Finally, our third and brief question... *What does that mean for us?* It means two things, Paul tells us. First, that grace produces humility, and second, that grace produces faith. Paul begins by giving the Gentiles and you and me a warning. He's very direct in verse 18. He says, "Do not be arrogant." You could see how that would be easy to do. The Gentiles would see Israel rejecting Jesus, and they would assume God was done with them. They might even assume their inclusion as Gentiles was because they were better than Israel.

This has reared its ugly head throughout the history of the church. There have been times throughout the church in which the church has practiced anti-Semitism, hatred of the Jews, because they believed God was done with the Jews and they were more important than Israel. Paul is telling us we can't think that way. We can't think we're the perfection of God's plan. We have been grafted in. What happened to them was not because of us.

Paul says it *this* way: they were not broken off because of your goodness; they were broken off because of their unbelief. It is only because of God's grace that salvation comes to the Gentiles or to you. God was not required to do that. It is all of grace. We have to see how we came to salvation. We have been grafted in. We are the recipients of promises that weren't even made to us. We are blessed by God's covenant with his people. We who were not a people are now the people of God.

We see this in the way Paul describes the grafting process. The natural process of grafting would be to take natural branches and graft them onto a wild tree. You may not know this, but you see this all the time. My guess is that all of you who are under the age of 20, maybe under the age of 30, have never or very rarely ever eaten an orange with seeds in it or a seeded watermelon. When I was young, we had to pick out all of the seeds in oranges, and when we had watermelon they had those big, huge black seeds.

I do have to say, young people, you're missing out on speed spitting contests, but watermelon is a lot easier to eat, especially indoors. So this doesn't exist anymore. Why? Because a tree came about that was seedless in its oranges, so what they did was they took portions of that tree and grafted it onto other wild trees so *they* would then become seedless too. That's why virtually all orange trees now are seedless, because there's a better market for seedless oranges. They've done all that grafting.

That's what you normally do. You graft the natural onto the wild. But Paul says, "No, no, no. This is grafting the wild onto the natural." This is so problematic for ordinary farming that commentators over the centuries have looked at this and said, "Paul, you don't have a clue. You may know a little bit about salvation, but you don't know anything about farming. Nobody ever grafts wild onto natural."

Of course, as soon as scientists say that, what happens? They come up with records that show that in Paul's day there *were* some people who actually did exactly that, but I don't think that's what Paul's point is. Paul's point here is God's work is supernatural. It is beyond nature. He's not imitating nature. You were wild and unproductive, and he has grafted you onto the natural tree, against nature, and he has brought blessing out of it. Why? Because he's God, because, Paul tells us, he has the power to graft onto the tree.

Your salvation should not have happened to you. You were dead in your trespasses and sins. You hated God. You did not have the promises of God. You were aliens to God and his promise, yet God in his mercy and grace brought you to himself. He saved you. How could you possibly respond to that with pride? Are you not humbled by the grace of God?

Paul also teaches us a final thing here, that the grace of God produces faith. Now what does that mean? That means if we truly know the grace of God, we will respond in faith, because grace always produces faith. How did Israel get cut off? By not believing. God did not spare them in their unbelief. They did not have the grace of God, and it was shown that they did not have the grace of God because of their unbelief.

Now what does that mean for us? We must examine ourselves. It is not enough to speak Christian things. It is not enough to go to church. It is not enough to have family members who believe in Jesus. *You* must believe in Jesus. What happens if you don't? Well, practically speaking, you may be able to fool me. You may be able to fool the elders. You may be able to fool your family. You may be able to fool society, but you know what? You can't fool God.

"If God did not spare the natural branches, why would he spare you?" Paul says in verse 21. He is God. He is not indebted to you for salvation. God's grace is a precious gift. You must look on it and see the goodness of God. God puts before you two things: severity and kindness. He tells you that both are very real. We see the severity of God in the way he dealt with Israel. Their unbelief brought judgment. They were not spared because they thought they were special.

But the kindness of God is also very real. It came to a people who were not a people. It brought salvation to the world. It promises even greater blessings when the fullness of Israel is brought in. Beloved, continue in God's kindness. Rest in his grace. Put all your hope in the Lord and none in yourself. When you do that, you are a part of God's people. You are grafted into the one tree. You know Jesus Christ as your Savior and the Lord as your God.