

First Fruits and Roots --- Romans 11:16-24

February 9, 2020

16If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. 17But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the [h]rich root of the olive tree, 18do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

Prophecy is a powerful line of evidence that the Bible is the very Word of God, and that God is sovereignly working out His design for all of creation and for all of time. When God records in the pages of Scripture events that will happen hundreds of years in the future and those events take place exactly how He said they would, then we can be assured that God is sovereign and that His Bible is what He says it is—the inspired Word of God.

Last week, we saw that God prophesied in Ezekiel's vision of dry bones that God would resurrect the nation of Israel, bring them back into their land, and then perform a spiritual resurrection upon them so that they will be saved through their Messiah: Jesus the Christ. We, of all generations of Christians, have been blessed to see that physical resurrection of the nation of Israel take place after they were considered dead for almost 2,000 years. They were scattered in AD 70, and thought (by many) to have gone out of existence. I believe that today we are seeing the stage being set for God to fulfill many Old Testament prophetic statements concerning the nation of Israel.

Prophecy is designed by God to keep us looking towards heaven and to help us not to get comfortable on this earth. I wonder if you could know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you would be raptured tomorrow or that death would usher you into the presence of Christ tomorrow, if you would live and think differently than you do now? Prophecy has that affect on us. It is designed to

give us an eager anticipation for His return and to consider how we are living our lives.

In Romans 13:11-14, Paul exhorts the Romans to live in light of God's future promises, “. . . *knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. ¹²The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.*”

God promised that the nation of Israel would be a special nation to Him. He has proven that true in history. We have the Word of God through that nation. We have the Messiah—the Savior of our never dying souls—through that nation. And now, Christ is fulfilling His promise to that nation that He will bring them into their land, and He will return to this earth and rule over them, and they will be a special nation to Him before the eyes of this world. I hope that, as we wind up our study in Romans 11 over the next couple of weeks, you will not only be astounded by God's design for mankind's history, but also be encouraged and spurred on to eager anticipation of Christ's return.

Review

Last week we considered some of the purposes for why God has laid aside the nation of Israel for a time. We considered verse 11 “. . . *by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.*”

Gentile salvation is one reason why God has laid the Jews aside for a time. We have had 2,000 years of Gentile salvation as a result. That is a clear historic reality proving God's sovereign design. A second purpose is that, as a result of Gentile salvation, the Jews will be moved to salvation because of jealousy. They will see what the Gentiles have; they will recognize that these spiritual blessings were intended for them; and they will also desire to possess them. This will take place in the future.

We also considered many of the promises in the Old Testament of God's future New Covenant that He will make with the nation of Israel. Jeremiah 31 and 32 as well as Ezekiel 36 and 37 are passages where the prophets speak of the New Covenant. These New Covenant passages point to the both the physical and spiritual resurrection of the nation of Israel. God said that He would make a New Covenant with the nation of Israel in which He would: put His Spirit in them;

forgive them of their sin; and restore them into the land.

Romans 11, among other chapters in the Bible, clearly explains that God cut off the Jews for the purpose of Gentile salvation, but God is not through with the Jews. Paul tells that the laying aside of the Jews is partial (not all of the nation is put aside). Paul adds that God's laying them aside is only temporary, and He has purpose for laying them aside—namely so that the Gospel will go to the Gentiles.

An important footnote concerning what we learned last week is, even though this chapter clearly teaches that God is not done with the Jews, our Reformed and Covenantal brothers and sisters somehow are convinced that God is done with the Jews. They teach that the Church replaces the nation of Israel; this is called Replacement Theology. I was pleased to read last week of many who are of the Reformed persuasion who do not teach Replacement theology and who believe that God will still deal with the Jews as a nation.

For example, James Montgomery Boice (as well as his predecessor, Donald Grey Barnhouse) were Presbyterian pastors who did not hold to a Covenantal position that God is done with the Jews. Boice writes, “In view of Paul's clear statements here and throughout Romans 11, I cannot see how so many Reformed theologians of our day reject the idea of a future time of blessing for Israel To their way of thinking, any future blessing of Israel as a nation must be a backward step, a regression in God's plan. Spiritual realities in Christ have replaced the Jewish types that pointed to them. The Church has replaced Israel. In this view, the Church becomes the new Israel, and the old Israel is superseded forever.

“But how can they affirm that, in view of Paul's teaching here? Paul is not talking about spiritual Israel in these chapters. He is talking about the Jews as a nation. And when Paul asked the question, 'Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recover?' His answer is as emphatic as when he is dealing with antinomianism or with the good purposes of God's law, namely 'Not at all! By no means! God forbid!' It was inconceivable to Paul that God would cast Israel off, because to do so would mean that God would be breaking His covenant promises, and He could not do that and remain a truth-keeping, faithful God.”

Boice goes on to mention many Reformed theologians of the past and today who believe that Israel has a future, i.e. Fredrick Godet, Charles Hodge, Robert Haldane, John Murray and Leon Morris just to name a few who are well-known. You may say, “Well, I have not heard of these guys.” But believe me, in biblical scholarship, these guys are heavy-weights.

Godet writes, "It is almost inconceivable how our Reformers could have held out obstinately, as they have done, against a thought so clearly expressed When Israel shall see the promises of the Old Testament, which ascribe to the Messiah the conversion of the Gentiles, to the God of Abraham, fulfilled throughout the whole world by Jesus Christ, and the Gentiles through His mediation loaded with blessings which they themselves covet, they will be forced to own that Jesus is the Messiah."

I told you last Sunday that in the end times—when Jesus returns—the Jews who are here will see Christ return, understand the magnificent blessings that have belonged to the Gentiles for thousands of years, be convinced that He is their Messiah, and believe upon Him for salvation.

Those believers who teach that the Church has replaced Israel hold to a certain theological system, commonly known as Covenantal or Covenant Theology (Presbyterians, Christian Reformed, Reformed and some Reformed Baptists are among those who are Covenantal. Lutherans have their own brand of Covenant Theology).

Those who are Covenantal believe that God is done with Israel as a nation, and the Church has replaced Israel. They teach that the Church is now God's chosen, holy "nation." But we see in our text that Paul emphatically denies that thinking and promises "life from the dead" for that nation.

I believe our passage this morning speaks directly to Replacement Theology and that is verses 17-18. "*But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.*" The Church needs to keep in mind the Jewish roots that we have in our salvation, and we will consider that this morning.

So I want to pick up our study in verses 16 and following under one predominant point. The point is God is fulfilling and will fulfill His promises to the Jews. We can see the stage being set today.

That truth should impact you as a believer in a number of ways. For example you, more than any other believer in Church history, should have an eager anticipation of The Rapture. It could happen at any time. Be ready. Do not get sucked into the world's value system or the catering of our culture to our fleshly desires.

In just a few weeks if The Rapture does not happen, we will begin considering Paul's application of all this truth so far in Romans 12:1-2, *“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

Another application that we see in this chapter is that we have a physical picture of God's faithfulness . . . no matter what. Nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If you doubt that, look at the Jews. If you are a believer who has repented and trusted in Christ for salvation and you can see the Holy Spirit's work in you, your assurance has an anchor in the very person of God Himself and His sovereignty.

Jesus said this about believers as He was speaking to those who did not believe in John 10:26-30, *“But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. 27My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. 30I and the Father are one.”*

First Fruits and Roots

So we see that God is utterly faithful to His promises. We, of all believers, should live in eager anticipation of Christ's return. Furthermore, the assurance of our salvation is wrapped in the very person of God. There are many applications concerning what Paul writes in Romans 11. This morning, I want to consider two pictures concerning God's dealing with the Jews. The first picture is of “First-fruits”, and the second picture is of “Roots”.

Follow closely as we consider what Paul writes here. This will all make sense as we go along.

First-Fruits

*If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also;
and if the root is holy, the branches are too.*

Romans 11:16

Here are two parallel pictures describing God's setting the nation of Israel apart as holy to Him. I have told you before how, in my studies, I come across difficult passages that are hard for me to understand at first. However when you

consider the context of a passage and begin to dissect it, it is thrilling to gain understanding and see what the author is saying. Such is the case here. We must keep in mind that Paul has consistently referred to Old Testament truths throughout chapters 9-11 and all of Romans for that matter.

So within the framework and context of the Old Testament and Romans 9-11, the meaning of these verses begins to come into focus. “Holy dough” and “holy roots and branches” are strange to us in the 21st century without reference to the Old Testament. We can understand God as holy but not dough and trees. But Paul is drawing upon Old Testament truths to further support his main theme here that God is working in Gentile salvation; and at the same time, He is not done with the Jewish nation.

In verse 16 in the NASB, “*first piece*” is better translated as “*first fruits*.” The emphasis is on “first-fruit” and when we consider references in the Old Testament, the first-fruit represents the whole lump. So in reference to the nation of Israel, Paul is saying that if the first-fruit is set aside and holy unto God, then the nation as a whole is set aside unto God. I will expound on this in a moment.

Furthermore taking into account the parallel illustration of the root and branches, we find that when the root is set apart to God, then the tree and branches also are set apart to God. In a nutshell, Paul's reference to “holy dough” and “holy roots and branches” refers to the fact that God set apart Abraham (the root and the first-fruit), and promised him that a nation would come out of him and that nation would be holy to God—set apart to God.

In fact, Paul will later say (in reference to the nation of Israel in Romans 11:28-29) that Gentile salvation is as a result of God laying aside the Jews for a time. “*From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; 29for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*” God will fulfill His promises to the Jews for the sake of the fathers who are the first-fruits and who form the root of the nation because God's gracious gifts to them and His calling of them are irrevocable.

Roots

17But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” 20Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21for if God did not spare the

natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

Romans 11:17-24

In verses 17-24, Paul expounds on the root and branches picture; so, I want to tell you what he is saying and then show you in the text. The root stands for the fathers of Israel (it might be only Abraham, yet it might be Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and even David). The natural olive tree with its branches stands for Israel, and the wild olive branches are Gentiles who have been grafted in.

In Paul's development of the idea, the natural branches of the tree represent individual Jews and successive generations of Jews who are broken off in order for individual Gentiles to be grafted in. The conclusion of the illustration is that, in time, God is going to graft the original or natural branches back into their own olive tree.

Paul is saying that the fathers of the nation of Israel are set apart to God (like first-fruits are set apart to God), and this has unavoidable consequences for their descendants. The Jews are a special people because they are descended from Abraham. Their being holy unto God is true even in their rebellious and defiant spiritual state. God has not given up on them.

Concerning the fact that the dough is holy, and the root and branches are holy all point to the fact that the nation is holy or set apart. The Jews were set apart to God by His choice of Abraham. Therefore, because Abraham was set apart, so are his descendants, even to this day. This does not mean that all the descendants of Abraham—that all Jews—are saved. Paul has already shown that this is not the case. But it does mean that they remain a people set apart for God's purposes. This setting them apart as holy to God is stated repeatedly in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy 7:6 *“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”*

In this chapter 7, Moses is instructing the nation of Israel on what they are to do when they enter the Promised Land. They are to destroy the Canaanite peoples and their culture, and they were definitely not to intermarry with them. Why? “because you are a holy people to YHWH... the LORD your God has chosen

you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

Deuteronomy 10:15 *“Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day.”*

Exodus 2:24-25 tells of the Jews' enslavement in Egypt and how they cried out to God for deliverance. *“So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.”* Deuteronomy 4:31 furthers this thought of God's deliverance. *“For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.”*

I could add many other verses to these that show that for the sake of the fathers, the people of Israel had a special relationship to God. Even when they sinned, God would not abandon them. Did they suffer for their sin? Absolutely. Were all the Jews saved? Absolutely not. Nonetheless down through the course of history, the purposes of God for His people continued unchanged; and in the end, will culminate in the salvation of the nation.

One Bible scholar wrote this, *“As the lump is holy through the offering of the first-fruit, and as the tree derives its character from the root, so the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who the Lord chose, were set apart by solemn covenant for His service and glory.”*

With that in mind, let's read the text itself in Romans 11:17-24. *“¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' ²⁰Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²²Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?”*

As I said before, the main point here is that most Jews have not believed on Jesus as their Messiah. Therefore they are cut off from the spiritual blessings that should belong to them because of their being Jews. But many Gentiles, who have no claim upon the spiritual blessings granted to Israel, have entered into those blessings by faith in the Jews' Messiah.

As far as the covenant of God with Israel is concerned, Paul says that it is being fulfilled. However, this fulfillment does not involve every individual Jewish person. Those whom God has elected to salvation are being saved—both Jews and Gentiles. In the end, there will be a time of repentance and spiritual blessing for Israel nationally.

Now I want to make some general observations concerning what we learn in verses 17 and 18 about the relationship between the Church and Israel.

17But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.

First, we learn from these verses that there is only one people of God. We are Dispensationalists meaning: on one hand, that the church does not replace Israel; on the other hand, we believe that God will still deal with Israel as a nation. But Dispensationalists have been guilty of drawing too bold of a line between Israel and the Church as if they have two separate eternities. Hyper-dispensationalists claim that there are two ways of salvation, one for the Jews and one for the Gentiles. That obviously is not true.

Here we find that the Gentile Church is grafted into the rich root of the Jewish fathers. When God promised Abraham that he would be the avenue by which all peoples on earth would be blessed, the Church is fulfilling that part of the Abrahamic covenant.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, Abraham has been presented as the father of all who are saved (since they are saved by faith) as he was. He is the root of the tree. Therefore, all who are saved, whether Jews or Gentiles, are saved only by believing God, as Abraham did, and are therefore part of the one olive tree.

Paul expounds on this truth in Galatians 3:6-9, *“Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. 7Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 8The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the*

gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." 9So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer." So we learn that there is only one people of God gaining life through one root.

Second, the engrafted branches are the Gentiles. They are not to boast over the branches that were cut off as if they were valuable themselves. We who are Gentiles are to bear in mind that we "do not support the root, but the root supports us." We Gentiles have no inherent claim to anything.

Do you remember what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well who wanted to debate theology instead of Jesus talking to her about her adultery and fornication? John 4:19-22 records the conversation. *"The woman said to Him, 'Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. 20Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.' 21Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.' "*

We have seen before that the Jews were set apart unto God to be the avenue by which the world would have salvation. The Jews were the ones who received the Law and the prophets and the writings. We would not have our Bibles had not the Jewish scribes faithfully and meticulously preserved the ancient documents for us.

Furthermore, the earthly line of the Messiah is through the Jews. Jesus was a descendent of Abraham through the tribe of Judah. He was a descendant of King David. All the early preachers in the early Church, including Paul himself, were Jews. Without their faithful preaching of these truths, none of us would have known the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So the way of salvation has been made known through the revelation given to Israel, through its kings and prophets, through the apostles, and above all through Jesus Christ. Jews benefit in exactly the same way Gentiles do: by believing in and trusting in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul says in verse 20 *"they were broken off for their unbelief"* and in verse 23 *"And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again."* Thus, Gentiles are not to boast. In our text, Paul specifically writes to Gentiles saying in Romans 11:13 *"But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry. . . ."*

It is true that Jewish branches were broken off so that, in God's providence, the

Gospel would go to the Gentiles. Their rejection has been a source of Gentile blessing. Boasting is being proud of one's own supposed achievements. But Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans that all boasting is put aside in regards to salvation.

First, we learn that there is only one people of God. Second, we learned the engrafted branches are the Gentiles, and they are not to boast over the cut-off branches as if they were valuable themselves.

A third observation is that God cutting off the Jews for Gentile salvation should provoke fear in us. Verses 20-22 state, “. . . *they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.*

This does not mean that we are to cower before God as Christians. It has to do with reverential awe before God's person. This reminds us that God is not mocked. It is a warning to continue in the faith. Galatians 6:7-8 states, “*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. 8For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.*”

The central issue that Paul has been making in his letter to the Romans is salvation by faith and not by works. True believers stand by faith. If one does not continue in faith, they are not saved. This should be a sobering thought for each one of us. There have been many who have claimed to believe, and who have been part of the Church, only to later renounce their faith. As a result, they are cut off. This is a fearful thought. They did not lose their salvation. It shows that they were never saved in the first place.

One well-known man who claimed to be a believer and yet recently renounced his faith is Joshua Harris. I read a recent article about Harris that says this, “Now, Harris, who is the father of three teenagers and divorced his wife of 20 years, spends some Sunday mornings doing yoga. He thinks he made massive mistakes about the Christian faith.”

Harris was quoted in the article saying, "I was a leader and a spokesman and I called people to live in very particular ways, to sacrifice in very particular ways. And so for me to have a change in my thinking feels like a betrayal to them. I was really just trying to be honest about the fact that all the ways that I had defined faith and Christianity, that I was no longer choosing to live according to

those."

There is a section in the article called, "Between the Lines" that says, "Harris chose not to say what his 'unrepentant sin' is, although he noted that oftentimes, it is related to sexuality. He didn't want to be more specific and added, 'It's like if the answer to the question of my sexuality puts me inside or outside of your circle, accepted or unaccepted, (Harris uses the Efinger saying) *Blank* you and *blank* your circle. That's how I feel. And so that's why I don't feel any need to answer that question.' The bottom line (the article says): Harris once was a Christian. But no more." Late last year, Harris marched in a Gay Pride Parade and was seen eating a rainbow colored donut while marching.

Paul writes in verses 20-22 "*. . . they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.*"

My friend, we need to take very seriously the call to fear and to self evaluation.

1 Corinthians 10:12 *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.*

Paul's warning here applies to us individually and to us corporately as the Gentile Church. We are to walk in a healthy reverential fear of God. If we cease to stand in grace by believing God, we too will fall.

Does that mean that salvation can be lost? No. Paul has been teaching the doctrine of perseverance. But we should never be presumptuous. What Paul tells us in these verses is that if the Gentiles fail to stand by faith, they will be cut off, just as the Jews were.

Churches in large sectors of the world are no longer effective because they grew weak in faith. At one time, these places had thriving churches but no longer. The churches today in those areas have been radically reduced and, in some cases, nearly gone for good. Consider this bit of Church History.

Churches in Asia Minor where Paul began his missionary journeys, what we today call Turkey, was the first major area of the ancient Gentile world to be evangelized. These were strong areas of Christianity for the first 300 years, but where are they today? Its gospel became moralism, and the Muslim invasions overwhelmed it. Today, Turkey is a mission field for Christianity.

The Church in Italy and North Africa. Many early great Christian leaders came from these areas: Cyprian, Clement, Origen, Athanasius and Saint Augustine. The Church in Rome grew to have great influence over all the Roman Empire. But its riches and power weakened it so that it declined in immorality in the Middle Ages. The Gentile Church's impact lessened until 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the Wittenburg door and the Protestant Reformation began.

The descendants of the Reformation tend to boast over the Roman Catholics praising Martin Luther and the Reformers. But we must remember that the same decline can be seen in the Reformation churches. They were once a dominant influence in Germany, Switzerland, France, and Holland. But the Reformation churches soon forgot the true Gospel and grew weak. Now there is only a small minority of Europeans who are true Bible-believing Christians.

That brings us to the modern Church in America. Even today, there is a decline of strong churches going on as a result of liberalism and extreme expressions of the Charismatic movement. Who would say that the present influence of Christianity on our culture's value system is as great today as it was even a decade ago . . . not to mention during the early years of our country's history.

What happened in these great sectors of Christianity happens in individual churches. You can look at churches in Europe that were once bastions of truth that are now dead. Can such a thing happen to a conservative, Bible-believing church? Yes. There was a quote in our studies in Philippians that says, "A church is only as strong as its members."