

Kindness

GOD'S PLAN FOR REDEMPTION INCLUDES ALL PEOPLE.

Shortly after I began writing for Lifeway, I attended a writers' conference. One piece of advice the editors gave the writers has stuck with me for years. They told us that writing to be understood was important, but just as important was writing so that we would not be misunderstood. I have actually tried to apply that piece of wisdom in my teaching and preaching ministries as well as my writing.

Misunderstandings happen for a variety of reasons. One cause is the occasional ambiguity of written messages. For example, I read an account of a college football coach whose team traveled to London to play an exhibition game. One day after practice, he walked out of the stadium intending to get lunch at a local pub. But the first pub he encountered had a big sign in the window saying, "NO FOOTBALL COACHES ALLOWED."

The coach was shocked. Were the locals upset that his team was using their soccer stadium? It took a while for him to realize his mistake. In England, "football" refers to soccer, and a "coach" is a bus. The sign did not mean that the pub would not serve him but that the establishment did not want busloads of rowdy soccer fans invading their pub, displacing locals, and generally causing problems.

I have also reminded students that even punctuation is important. When translating Greek (which did not use punctuation in the first century), the translator must work to identify the beginning and ending of sentences and the placement of periods or question marks.

Written messages can easily be misunderstood, especially if the context is not clear or the author is not present to explain his intent. Paul wrote in a way that anticipated and answered questions and to avoid confusion that could result from his writings. He feared that his presentation of the gospel could be misunderstood or misrepresented to imply that he had washed his hands of Israel, or even worse, that God Himself had disowned those who were previously His people. So let's read carefully and do our best to understand clearly Paul's teaching regarding the nature of the gospel and Israel's place in God's plans for all humanity

Romans 11:1-36

Paul's explanation of the gospel (chaps. 1-8) apparently led some to question both the apostles' concern for his countrymen and even God's present interest in and future plans for Israel. In response (chaps. 9-11), Paul strongly asserted his love, respect, and hope for his fellow Israelites (9:1-3; 10:1-2). He also affirmed them as God's people, along with the goodness of the covenants, the law, the temple, and promises revealed in their history (9:4-5). Some of Paul's opponents may have concluded that the rejection of the gospel by so many Israelites marked Paul's gospel as unnecessary at best and entirely false at worst. On the other hand, sympathetic readers may have concluded that since the gospel truly is from God, then God's previous plan for His people must have failed (v. 6). Does Paul's gospel teach that God has rejected Israel (11:1) and is doing something entirely new apart from them?

 ▶ EXPLORE THE TEXT ◀

Rejection (Rom. 11:11-16)

Israel's rejection does not mean that the gospel is false. Nor does the inclusion of the Gentiles mean that God has rejected the people of Israel. Avoiding both errors requires understanding that God has been offering deliverance by grace through faith from the beginning. Some in Israel might not have recognized this truth, just as some Gentiles might not. But for both, acceptance of grace through faith brings "life from the dead" (v. 15).

VERSE 11

I ask, then, have they stumbled so as to fall? Absolutely not! On the contrary, by their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel jealous.

I ask, then moves Paul's argument forward on the basis of the Scriptures just cited (vv. 8-10). Some in Israel were responsive to God and were chosen by grace (v. 5). But others within Israel rejected the prophets

(v. 3), refused to follow the ways of God (v. 4), and were hardened in their opposition to the things of God (v. 7).

Israel as a nation had historically included some faithful Israelites in the midst of many who were faithless. Did this faithless majority, with “eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear” (vv. 8-10) cause the downfall of the nation? Had Israel **stumbled so as to fall**?

Absolutely not! The **they** in the question refers to Israel, but more specifically it addresses the plight of the majority of Jews who rejected the gospel of Christ. The mention of their stumbling recalls 9:30-33 and 11:7-10 where Israel’s rejection of Christ was described with language of stumbling and hardening. The fact that they had stumbled was not in dispute. But one may recover from a stumble. Stumbling *so as to fall*, however, implies a stumble from which a person does not recover.

Unbelieving Israel, Paul asserted, can recover from **their transgression** of rejecting God’s Messiah (9:33). Paul himself rejected Jesus as Messiah and then later turned to Him in faith. So might other unbelievers within Israel. Not only was Israel’s unbelief not necessarily permanent, but in addition, God used it to advance His plan for all humanity.

By Israel’s rejection of Jesus, **salvation has come to the Gentiles**. Acts reflects the same reality (Acts 1:8). Initially, the church remained in Jerusalem and Judea, preaching only to fellow Jews (chaps. 1-7). But after Jewish opposition to the gospel escalated to the level of physical persecution, the church was dispersed to the Gentile world (8:1-8; 11:19-20). Jewish opposition led directly to the Gentile mission. This does not mean that God manufactured Israel’s unbelief, but rather that He sovereignly worked through human rejection to advance His plan to bring the message of salvation to all people.

The Gentile mission in turn served an additional divine purpose: **to make Israel jealous**. Here Paul indicated why Israel had not stumbled *so as to fall*. The Gentile mission would demonstrate the truth of the gospel and lead Jewish opponents to become Jewish believers.

VERSE 12

Now if their transgression brings riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness bring!

Paul had already explained that Israel’s **transgression**, their rejection of Jesus, paradoxically brought **riches for the world**. The second phrase, **their failure riches for the Gentiles**, expresses the same basic idea. The *world*, that is the non-Jewish world of *Gentiles*, was enriched or

blessed by the Gentile mission that came about in God's plan and as the result of Jewish rejection of the gospel message.

But God's plan also anticipates that jealousy eventually will lead even more within Israel to embrace the gospel. Paul looked forward to the **fullness** of the Jews being achieved and the blessings brought to humanity as a result. Paul clearly understood Israel to have an important part in the future fulfillment of God's plan for the salvation of humanity.

VERSES 13-14

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Insofar as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if I might somehow make my own people jealous and save some of them.

Some of Paul's Gentile readers might have wondered what all this discussion of the Jews had to do with them. Or they might have wondered why the **apostle to the Gentiles** should concern himself with the condition or the future of the Jews. Paul asserted, **I magnify my ministry**. Paul's calling as apostle to the Gentiles did mark an area of responsibility, but it did not limit the scope of his ministry (Acts 9:15; 22:21). He typically went first to the synagogues in the cities he evangelized and from there expanded to engage God-fearers and other Gentiles who needed to hear the gospel (13:14; 14:1). He saw ministry to both groups as complementary. Paul saw his Gentile mission as a means to **make my own people jealous**. The evangelization of Gentiles was important. Paul devoted his life to this task. But he also understood how he fit into God's larger plan. If his ministry among the Gentiles could serve to make Israel reconsider their rejection of Jesus and **save some of them**, then his ministry would have paid dividends beyond his direct work among the Gentiles.

VERSE 15

For if their rejection brings reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

Paul next used an argument from lesser to greater to stress the benefit to the whole world of Jewish conversions. The majority of Jews had rejected the gospel, and in God's grand plan this led to the Gentile mission bringing the message of **reconciliation to the world**. So Paul reasoned if a lesser number of Jewish conversions and rejection by the majority benefited all humanity, how much greater benefit should come from a greater number of Jewish conversions. Their **acceptance** will mean **life from the dead**.

VERSE 16

Now if the firstfruits are holy, so is the whole batch. And if the root is holy, so are the branches.

Paul expressed his confidence that God was not finished with Israel and Israel was not completely alienated from God using two images common in the Old Testament. The **firstfruits** dedicated to God sanctified **the whole batch** (Lev. 23:9-14; Num. 15:17-21). Similarly, **branches** that grew from a sanctified **root** would themselves be expected to be **holy**. Both images appeal to Israel's beginning as the people of God as evidence that what grows from Israel will also retain the character of a people of God. Paul was confident that God cared for both Jews and Gentiles. The gospel was good news to both. Reconciliation and new life were available to both. While some may reject the word of truth, Paul assured the Romans that the gospel is for all people.

Explore Further

Paul did not consider Israel's stumbling, their rejection of Jesus, as the end of their story. Who do you know who has rejected the good news? Pray that God will help you understand what has caused them to reject the gospel and how you might help them come to faith in Jesus.

Grafted (Rom. 11:17-22)

Animosity between Jews and Gentiles was common. Gentiles who clung to their disdain for Israel might have been tempted to boast that God had rejected the Jews in favor of non-Jews (v. 1). Jewish Christians were reluctant to see Gentiles who did not adopt Jewish ways as acceptable before God (Acts 15:1). Both groups were wrong. Paul understood that God intended to make one people of faith including both Jews and Gentiles and used a well-known analogy to make his point.

VERSE 17

Now if some of the branches were broken off, and you, though a wild olive branch, were grafted in among them and have come to share in the rich root of the cultivated olive tree,

God had not rejected Israel in spite of the fact that some Israelites had rejected Him in the past, just as some had rejected Jesus. The root of Israel, the faith of Abraham and those like him, was holy and had produced holy branches (v. 16). This did not absolve all Israelites of their sin, but it did mean that historic Israel was the root from which the church had grown. And both the Jews and the Gentiles needed to understand that this truth bonded them together as one people of God.

Israel is compared to a **cultivated olive tree** from which some **branches were broken off**. He then depicted Gentile believers as a **wild olive branch** that was **grafted** into the *cultivated olive tree*. Grafting an inferior wild olive branch into a superior cultivated olive tree is the exact opposite of a normal process. But Paul was not giving a lesson in horticulture; he was trying to explain the connection between Israel and the Gentiles.

Israel's root was holy (v. 16), and the nation grew from this root, cultivated by God through leaders provided throughout its history. From this cultivated tree *some of the branches were broken off* "because of unbelief" (v. 20). In contrast, the Gentile *wild olive branch* was grafted to the holy root of the nation of Israel. These wild branches were included on the basis of their faith (v. 20). Therefore, Gentile believers should understand that they are not a separate, free-standing entity, but that they **share in the rich root** of Israel.

VERSE 18

do not boast that you are better than those branches. But if you do boast—you do not sustain the root, but the root sustains you.

Gentile people of faith benefit from the history, the Scriptures, and the wisdom of Israel. All people of faith are one and should respect and value one another. As a result, Gentile believers should **not boast**. The term *boast* implies exulting over someone else. Believing Jews and Gentiles are not in competition for God's favor.

The Gentile believers were not created as an alternative to Israel but included as a continuation and expansion of faithful Israel. Building on the analogy of the olive tree, Paul reminded the Gentile believers **you do not sustain the root, but the root sustains you**. Israel's history instructs the church. Israel's Scriptures reveal the nature of God. Israel's prophets prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. The Gentile believers should celebrate the history it shares with Israel—not act as if Israel was a meaningless relic of the past.

VERSE 19

Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”

Paul raised an argument that one of his readers might have expressed. He did this for the purpose of refuting it. In response to his olive tree analogy, some persistent critic of Israel might have argued that Jewish **“branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”** The observation implies that God disposed of at least a portion of Israel and preferred to incorporate Gentiles in their place. Paul’s teaching about the remnant (vv. 5-7) and the olive tree analogy means that the observation is correct. But the arrogance implied in the statement is misplaced, and even dangerous.

VERSES 20-21

True enough; they were broken off because of unbelief, but you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but beware, because if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

True enough concedes the accuracy of the core observation. Some of Israel **were broken off**. But this was not done because God preferred Gentiles over Jews. It happened **because of unbelief**. In other words, unfaithful Jews separated themselves from God by means of their lack of faith.

But you introduces an emphatic contrast. The contrast is not one of ethnicity, but one of faith. Their lack of faith removed some Jews from the tree. In contrast, it was the presence of faith that resulted in believing Gentiles being added to the tree. So, believing Gentiles stand in God’s favor **by faith**.

Given this truth, Gentile Christians must **not be arrogant, but beware**. The olive tree analogy does not teach that Gentiles are superior to Jews but that God deals with people on the basis of their faith or lack of faith. Gentiles in the church then should understand that the same principle applies to them that applied to ethnic Israel. People of faith are genuinely part of the people of God. But faithless people, even those who reside in the midst of the faithful, do not stand in God’s favor, and absent faith will ultimately suffer divine judgment.

Paul drove his point home by stating his warning explicitly. The **if** clause Paul used assumed the truth of the statement. **If** [or “since”] **God did not spare the natural branches** asserts the fact of divine judgment on unbelieving Jews. As *natural branches* they were part of

historical Israel. They were residents among God's chosen people. If God were a God who showed favoritism, surely these would have endured in His favor. But that did not happen.

The God who sees the heart and who judges justly dealt with faithless Israel according to its unbelief. Since He did so with the Jews, He will certainly also do so with the Gentiles. God does not show favoritism but deals justly and consistently with all people. Thus, Paul warned his Gentile readers in the church, if God did not spare Jewish unbelievers, then **he will not spare you either.**

VERSE 22

Therefore, consider God's kindness and severity: severity toward those who have fallen but God's kindness toward you—if you remain in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

Paul not only warned his readers against a false arrogance; he also urged them to reflect on God's dealings with Israel and learn about the nature of God as a result. **Consider** translates a word that means to see or understand. He was not encouraging reflection so much as urging them to learn the truth revealed in God's treatment of Israel.

Paul wanted the Gentile believers especially to see **God's kindness and severity**. The two words together provide a balanced perspective on the nature and the actions of God. *Severity* without *kindness* can be cold and uncaring. But our God is not a severe God who rules harshly without concern for His creation. *Kindness* without *severity* lacks a moral compass. It can lack the ability to guide the recipient away from evil and toward godliness. But our God is not a doting, indifferent parent unconcerned with providing guidance and unwilling to impose judgment. God is both kind and morally consistent.

God's *severity* is seen in His treatment of **those who have fallen**. The branches cut off from the tree of Israel for unbelief reveal a morally consistent God. God's *kindness* is seen **toward you** in that the good news of salvation extended to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were grafted into the tree of Israel not on the basis of merit but by God's grace and on the basis of their faith (11:19-20). Understanding God's *kindness* and *severity* should provide both hope and warning. God's kindness persists **if you remain in his kindness**. This does not mean that the Christian must somehow continue to earn God's kindness. *Kindness* in Paul's explanation to this point is not earned by good deeds or law-keeping, but the result of grace through faith. Those who remain in God's kindness are those who by faithfulness reveal that their faith is genuine.



Explore Further

Read “Israel, Spiritual” on pages 837–838 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does Paul’s analogy of the pruning and grafting of an olive tree fit in with the concept of a “spiritual” versus an ethnic Israel? What does the olive tree analogy teach about the importance of faith?

Restoration (Rom. 11:23-24)

John the Baptist warned his Jewish audience that those who did not “produce fruit consistent with repentance” would be cut down and cast into the fire, even if they were the children of Abraham (Luke 3:8-9). Jesus taught that He is the vine, and “if anyone does not abide in me,” he will be like a branch that is removed and thrown into the fire (John 15:6, ESV). Did Paul’s olive tree analogy mean that pruned branches were destined for destruction? Or is there hope even for unbelieving Jews?

VERSE 23

And even they, if they do not remain in unbelief, will be grafted in, because God has the power to graft them in again.

Paul’s analogy of the olive tree seems to point toward a tragic end for those Jewish “branches” pruned from the tree. In a normal horticultural process, pruned branches are thrown away and destroyed. A branch is pruned specifically because it is unproductive or in some way harmful to the tree, so it is removed permanently. In no normal instance would a pruned branch ever be grafted back into the tree from which it was removed.

But analogies are not science lessons. And Paul was attempting to teach the Roman believers about the kingdom of God, not teach them horticulture. So, it was not the analogy that determined Paul’s next comments but the nature of the kingdom of God.

And even they . . . will be grafted in adds a word of hope for the unbelieving Jews who were pruned from the olive tree. Paul had already taught that only people of faith were true children of Abraham (chap. 4). Thus, not all descendants of Israel were Israel (9:6). Scholars often refer to this as the distinction between “physical Israel” and “spiritual Israel.”

The remnant (11:5) or the spiritual Israel who shared the faith of Abraham remained as part of the olive tree, but other Jews were removed because of their unbelief (v. 20).

While their rejection of Jesus revealed that they were not people of faith, so not part of spiritual Israel, the possibility remains that they could repent and become people of faith. If they do, **God has the power to graft them in again**. People who turn to Jesus in faith are forgiven, not cast away. Even those Israelites who had previously rejected Jesus, even those who had persecuted the church as Paul had, could be saved by grace through faith.

VERSE 24

For if you were cut off from your native wild olive tree and against nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these—the natural branches—be grafted into their own olive tree?

The Gentiles' own experience also provided evidence of the hope that remained for unbelieving Israel. For the Gentiles belonged, in Paul's analogy, to a **wild olive tree** and did not share the root of Israel's faith. But by the grace and power of God and by their faith in Jesus, God **grafted** them into His **cultivated olive tree**. Since God showed such great grace to the Gentiles, surely He would extend grace to unbelieving Israel once they turned to faith in Jesus.

Some Jews had excluded themselves from the people of God by their failure to share the faith of Abraham. They had rejected Jesus. But just like the Gentiles, they could be restored to a right standing with God by faith. The message of good news to the Gentiles was equally good news to the Jews. For all who repent and turn in faith to Jesus will be saved.

Explore Further

What does this passage teach us about God's nature? Do you see evidence of God's patience or of God's love for all people in Paul's comments? What does the passage imply about Paul's attitude toward people who disagreed with him and rejected the gospel he preached? Pray that God's grace, evident in His gospel, might be evident in your attitude toward others also.
