



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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Lesson 12

Romans 11:11-24 Commentary New Revised Standard Version

(Romans 11:11) So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.

Paul had previously stated that not all physical Israelites were spiritual Israelites, and many had stumbled over the stumbling stone (see Romans 9). In chapter 10, Paul stated that salvation was only by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law; furthermore, believers were responsible for preaching the good news of Jesus and hearers were responsible for believing in the good news of Jesus. Paul's teachings in Romans chapters 8 and 9 did not remove the human responsibility to preach the gospel and to respond to the gospel in faith, to respond to God's grace and offer of salvation as the rest of the Bible teaches. In chapter 11, Paul stated that the rejection of Jesus the Messiah by some in spiritual Israel was only temporary, as in his own case. Because of the spiritual Israelites temporary transgressions, salvation came to the Gentiles so the Israelites would become envious, which might result in some reconsidering their rejection of Jesus the Messiah and then turning to saving faith in Him as Paul did.

(Romans 11:12) Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

Transgression and sin is the willful violation of God's law and especially the rejection of God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus the Messiah. When the Jews rejected Paul's preaching, he went to the Gentiles, and many Gentiles received the riches that flow from saving faith in Jesus Christ. Someday, those in spiritual Israel will receive Jesus Christ and

because of their former rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, their riches that flow from faith in Him will be even more precious to them: “much greater riches.”

(Romans 11:13) Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry

In writing to both Jews and Gentiles who were Christians in Rome, Paul now wanted the Gentile Christians to pay special attention to what he wrote. Because of the Jews rejection of Paul and the gospel, he turned to the Gentiles and was approved as the apostle to the Gentiles; whereas, Peter was known as the apostle to the Jews. Paul did not consider himself demoted to a lesser place or promoted above others, but he thankfully, happily, and graciously embraced his honorable call to serve the Gentiles and lead many to faith in Christ.

(Romans 11:14) in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them.

Paul wrote of a possible consequence for the Israelites who became jealous and envious after many Gentiles accepted Jesus as the Messiah. As Paul knew well from his own experience as a persecutor of Christians, jealousy can lead to anger and anger to persecution. However, Paul came to saving faith in Jesus, and he began to preach about Jesus to Jews and Gentiles. With prayer and preaching, he hoped that he might somehow save some of the Jews who had rejected Jesus as he once had done.

(Romans 11:15) For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!

By the grace of God, Paul led many Gentiles to justifying faith in Jesus Christ. When God declared these Gentiles right before Him by grace through faith, they came into a right relationship with God (reconciliation). “The world” in this verse means Jews and Gentiles all around the world, people of every race and nationality: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Belief in Jesus leads to receiving the gift of

eternal life (see also Romans 10:8-13). Someday spiritual Israel will receive Jesus and eternal life, and it will be “life from the dead” (the beginning of a never-ending relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) because the wages of sin is death and Jesus will free them from slavery to sin, Satan, and spiritual death.

(Romans 11:16) If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

Paul now turned to illustrations from food offerings and agriculture. As an offering of first fruits, if you took a part of the dough from a bowl of dough and offered it to the Lord, it meant you thought the whole of the dough in the bowl was clean and holy. The part taken out is like the whole; the part is as clean as the whole. What flows from and through the root of a tree (the sap) flows through every living branch in the tree. If the root is holy and healthy (not diseased), so is the sap that flows from it, and so are the live branches that receive the sap for nourishment. The sap in the tree’s roots in some sense may represent the Word and Spirit of God, and the olive tree represents spiritual Israel. The roots may be seen as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who lived by faith, and the sap flowed through them to all their spiritual descendants. The olive tree, spiritual Israel, included all those who became Christians under Paul’s preaching and the preaching of others. The first Israelite Christians in Paul’s day were like first fruits, and they represented what the whole of spiritual Israel would eventually become when unbelieving Jews finally came to believe in Jesus too. Eventually, all of spiritual Israel will come to saving faith in Jesus the Messiah, and even today those who are a part of spiritual Israel do come to know Jesus the Messiah as their Lord and Savior.

(Romans 11:17) But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree,

No human illustration will answer all of our questions; but as such, illustrations can further our understanding. Illustrations can sometimes

raise more questions—questions with answers beyond human ability to completely understand or learn from God or the Bible or an illustration. Many illustrations are made to simply illustrate one point, not to answer secondary questions. The olive tree and root represent Israel. Jews who persist in unbelief can be broken off and not receive the life-giving nourishment that comes from faith in Jesus. By grace through faith, some Gentiles have been grafted into spiritual Israel by God; they did not graft themselves in by themselves so as to boast. Just as some in spiritual Israel had come to trust in Jesus as the Messiah, so some Gentile Christians had come to believe in Jesus too. That meant both Jewish and Gentile Christians would receive life-giving nourishment, the work and presence of the Holy Spirit within them, from God.

(Romans 11:18) do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

Since God saves Jews and Gentiles by grace through faith and not by their good works or perfect obedience to the law of God, there is no room for Jews or Gentiles to feel superior to one another. Paul wrote this part of his letter to the Gentile Christians who could be tempted to think they were better than the Israelites who had rejected Jesus (perhaps temporarily) and the Israelites who had rejected them as inferior to Jews (perhaps temporarily). After all, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the faithfulness of a remnant for centuries in spiritual Israel supported Christian Gentiles with the Scriptures and true faith that had been handed down for generations to them.

(Romans 11:19) You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”

Human nature is such that we can be tempted to think that there is something in us (our past achievements or future promise of achievements) that make us better than others. Since believers are saved by grace through faith, there is no reason for any believer to think of themselves as better than unbelievers and boast about it or feel superior: that attitude of

superiority will not lead unbelievers to believe what we believe about Jesus.

(Romans 11:20) That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.

Believers need to remember that they were not grafted into the Christian faith because they were better than someone who is not a Christian. They were grafted in by undeserved grace through faith, and they have the responsibility to stand in faith as long as they live. Earlier in his letter Paul wrote, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2). And Peter wrote, “With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it” (1 Peter 5:12). In our spiritual battles, sometimes all we can do is “stand,” Paul wrote, “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place” (Ephesians 6:11-14). In troubled times, sometimes all we can do is stand, as God has commanded us. Because of their unbelief, those who have heard the good news of Jesus and have rejected Him as the Messiah are not Christians. There is no reason for a Christian to be arrogant or proud; rather, a Christian should stand amazed and in awe that God has saved them by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They should tremble lest they stumble as to fall and are broken off spiritual Israel as a branch from a tree,

(Romans 11:21) For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.

One of the ways God preserves in saving faith those who are spiritual Israel is by helping them persevere in saving faith when tempted by the world, the flesh, and the devil to fall completely away from saving faith in Jesus Christ. God preserves believers in Jesus, and believers in Jesus persevere in believing in Jesus when they diligently heed and prayerfully apply the warnings of the Scriptures to their lives. Even if they call themselves Christians, God warns that He will not spare the disobedient and unfaithful: true Christians will come under the corrective discipline of the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to be very careful that our human theological inventions do not hinder the ability of the Bible and the Holy Spirit to help Christians persevere in their faithful obedience to Jesus Christ through the Bible's warnings to believers. By the truth of the Bible and the guidance and power of the enabling Holy Spirit, Jesus preserves believers in a right relationship with God, and true believers in Jesus Christ want to persevere in their faith to the end, even during the darkest days of trials and temptations.

(Romans 11:22) Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

Paul emphasized human and Christian responsibility and the fact that our choices have consequences. Believers should consider the kindness and the sternness of the Lord and behave accordingly. They can continue in God's kindness or turn (fall away) from God and act unkindly and unlawfully toward others and suffer the consequences. Unhappily, believers can turn from faithfully following the Lord Jesus Christ and come under His stern discipline and not know why they are suffering. Not all suffering, but some suffering, is a consequence of being cut off from the life-giving nourishment of God's Holy Spirit and the true understanding of God's Word as God disciplines His disobedient child to correct them. Paul did not say that true believers in Jesus Christ could not be grafted back into the tree again if God finds it necessary to cut them off. Paul writes carefully so God's warnings in the Bible will have God's intended effects.

(Romans 11:23) And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.

One might ask how a person who is predestined, called, justified, and glorified can persist in unbelief. Paul did not answer that question, because he was led by the Holy Spirit to emphasize that Christians are saved by grace and for no other reasons known to them (though God always reasons and acts with love). Whole theological systems have been invented by people trying to provide answers to questions the Bible does not definitively reveal to our human understanding (at least not to my human understanding). To preserve us and help us persevere in faith, God encourages believers with the fact that if they do not persist in unbelief, then God is able to bring them back into a saving relationship with Him. See the parable of the Prodigal Son, as well as the parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep, in Luke 15.

(Romans 11:24) For if you have been 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 natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Olive trees are slow-growing and live to an old age. Nature does not graft olive trees, people do. Humans graft olive trees, usually by taking a young budding stem and placing it into an older and established olive tree. With grafting, olives of a desirable quality will be more quickly produced from the branch that has been grafted into the tree. In Paul's illustration, the Gentiles did not have the cultivation of spiritual Israel with their many gifts from God (see Romans 9:4-5), especially the promises and teachings about the coming Messiah and the law of love. By God grafting Gentile believers (Christians) into spiritual Israel, these Gentile believers would become cultivated (civilized in the Kingdom of God) through the Scriptures and their growing faith in Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit helped them understand and use God's gifts to them. As a Jew, Paul readily and eagerly became a Christian because he knew the Scriptures as a Pharisee, and when he met Jesus he saw how Jesus had fulfilled the Scriptures. Paul knew that

because of their spiritual cultivation (see Romans 9:4-5) that others in spiritual Israel could and would readily become Christians too with God's timing and in God's way: see Romans 10:9—"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." After Christian Gentiles were grafted into spiritual Israel, the early church flourished and produced much good fruit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. When Paul "failed" in his outreach to the Jews, what did he do and how did he feel about it?
2. What did Paul mean by "the world" and the reconciliation of "the world."
3. When he used an olive tree as an illustration, how did Paul describe the Jews who rejected Jesus and what could happen to them?
4. How did Paul use an olive tree to describe Gentiles who believed in Jesus?
5. What warning did Paul give the Gentile Christians?

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