

Bible Study Romans 11

Paul has already made it clear that the Jews have lost their former role as God's covenant people. The Gentiles have joined them to form a new covenant people, the Church. The Jewish path to salvation by Old Testament law-keeping has been replaced by faith in Christ and obeying His commandments of love. Now Paul returns to the status of his people for further clarification:

“11:1 I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.”

God may have restructured His relationship with the Jews, but He has not abandoned them.

“Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, 3 “LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”? 4 But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

These verses are referring to an event in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17). The Prophet Elijah (also called Elias) lived at a time where the Israelites' apostasy was at its height. They were worshipping the pagan god Baal and had forgotten the first Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Through Elijah, God sent a draught upon the Israelites which resulted severe famine. Finally, Elijah challenged all the priests of Baal to a duel – Elijah built one altar and they built their altar. God sent fire upon Elijah altar. The onlookers saw the power of the true God, and by Elijah's command, killed all the priests of Baal, and the draught was also lifted.



One would think that this spectacular miracle would have emboldened Elijah. On the contrary, it sent him into frustration, and near despair. He believed that he was the only Israelite who was faithful to God. “So he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars,

and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life” (1 Kings 19:10). Paul quotes this verse in Romans 11: *“LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”?*

We Orthodox Christians today can be tempted to fall into similar pessimism today. We look at the gathering darkness in the world and in our country and see apostasy and moral corruption at every turn.



Dodgers re-invite drag nuns to Pride Night after cutting them

Baseball team apologizes to Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence after removing group from event amid conservative opposition



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We can be tempted to believe that we are alone in keeping the faith. The point Paul is making here we are not alone. Even if we someday find ourselves outnumbered, God will always have a faithful remnant.

“⁵ Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”

Ancient Israel was engulfed in faithlessness more often than not. But God always had a faithful “gulf stream” within the ocean of apostasy. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were good examples. They were both senior members of the Sanhedrin which betrayed Christ to the Romans. Yet they were quietly faithful. Nicodemus secretly sought guidance from Christ, defended him publicly at His trial, and brought 100 lbs of spices to Christ’s tomb. Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus and placed it in his own tomb. They are both saints in the Orthodox Church. Then, as now, God has many followers that we do not see. We should not doubt the ultimate triumph of the Church over all its enemies. *“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).*

Even though there was a remnant of the Jewish faithful which was often invisible, what did Paul say about the majority of Jews which were not faithful? This is a good example of how

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should view people in our own world, especially those who claim to be Christians, who veer far from the faith. We may be perplexed and appalled by them, but we are not allowed to hate them. We can, and should, humbly explain truth to them. *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).*

If we share our faith to others “with meekness and fear” and they reject it, we should not be surprised. This passage of Romans 11 tells us why:

“⁷ What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. ⁸ Just as it is written:

*“God has given them a spirit of stupor,
Eyes that they should not see
And ears that they should not hear,
To this very day.”*

These verses teach us that most people reject the Gospel because they are asleep, blind, and deaf. These spiritual conditions make it impossible for them to receive the Good News no matter how it is presented. This may not be a lifelong condition. Paul once persecuted Christians, and his hatred of them at the time made him asleep, blind and deaf. This condition ended when he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. It may be that some people who reject Christianity today may become another Paul someday.

In the meantime, the text continues:

“⁹ And David says:

*‘Let their table become a snare and a trap,
A stumbling block and a recompense to them.
¹⁰ Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see,
And bow down their back always.’”*

Note that David takes his frustration to God, and places his frustration in His hands. We can be tempted to think that we can convince non-believers into belief on our own. We can try quoting this Bible verse, that saint, relate our personal experience, but to no avail. We must realize that our arguments usually fail. We are literally trying to convince a person in a coma to be awake, argue a blind person into seeing, and cajole a deaf person into hearing. These verses from Romans 11 teach us that God is the only One who can truly make the awaken the sleeper, give sight to the blind, and give hearing to the deaf.

Paul returns to the current status of Jews:

“¹¹ I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. ¹² Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness.”

The Jews have truly “fallen” from their former place as God’s covenant people. That once exalted position has been passed to the Church, which was rapidly becoming predominantly Gentile. Paul is saying that this new exalted position of Gentiles in the Church is only possible by the faithful Jews of the past. He addresses the newcomers directly:

“¹³ For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴ if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”

Paul hopes that the uplifting of the Gentiles into their new position of honor will inspire faithless Jews to join them through faith in Christ, and recover their lost position before God. Paul uses the grafting of plants as a metaphor to describe the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

“¹⁶ ...and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

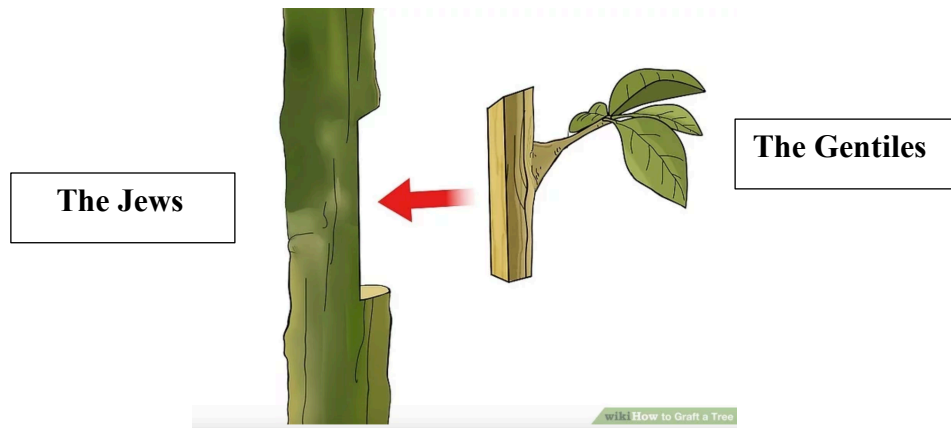
That root is Christ. The branches are his believers. *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). He continues this horticultural imagery:*

“¹⁷ And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.”

These verses recall Christ’s similar metaphor, as He applies it to Himself:

“Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2).

He says *“Without me, you can do nothing” (verse 5)*. The faithless Jews of the past bore no fruit, so they were “taken away.” The branches who “bear fruit” are the faithful Jews who received His message, and are therefore “pruned” to bear more fruit. One of the functions of pruning an old branch is to graft in a new branch. Unless the old branch is pruned, it cannot support a new branch.



“¹⁹ You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ ²⁰ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. ²² Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.”

Just as an unproductive branch is often cut off, an unproductive soul can also be cut off. This principle is reflected several times in the New Testament. “Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, “Let no fruit grow on you ever again.” Immediately the fig tree withered away” (Matthew 21:18-19).

John the Baptist warned: “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). This verbal image is reflected in the icon of Christ’s baptism.



The bad news of an unproductive branch is that it can be cut down. The good news is that it can also be restored. This is also true of the soul.

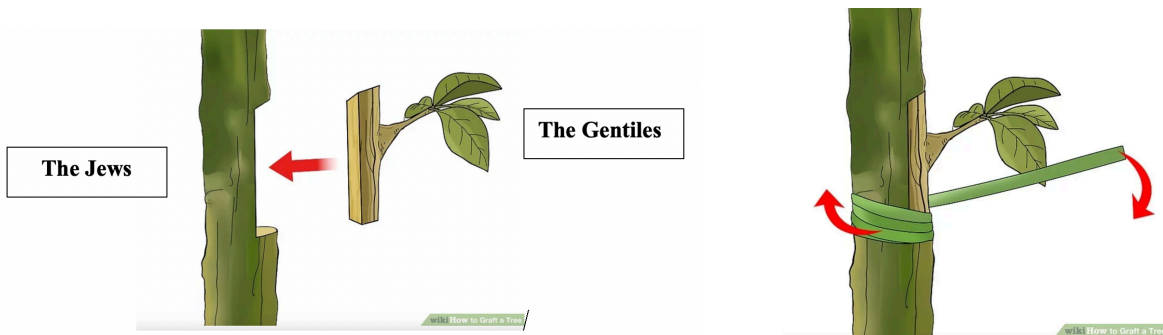
“²³ And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?”

Paul is a perfect example of one who was a part of the Jewish root, who was eventually grafted into the Root of Christ. Gentiles are now being grafted into the same root, along with the faithful Jews.

“²⁵ For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel...”

We saw earlier that verse 8 that God has given most Jews, “... a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.”

However, this blindness will not last forever: “... that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (verses 25-26).



“And so all Israel will be saved”

Based on this verse, and a few others like it, many commentators conclude that this means that the sleep, blindness and deafness that most Jews have against the Gospel will be lifted in the End Times. When that happens, they will become Christians in mass. Many Orthodox commentators share this view, such as St. Cyril of Alexandria: “*Though it was rejected, Israel will also be saved eventually, a hope which Paul confirms quoting this text of Scripture. For indeed Israel will be saved in its own time and will be called at the end, after the calling of the Gentiles.*”

²⁶ ... as it is written:

*“The Deliverer will come out of Zion,
And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;
²⁷ For this is My covenant with them,
When I take away their sins.”*

This is a quote of Isaiah 59:26. It is one of several Old Testament prophecies of a future New Covenant that God would make with Israel. In this New Covenant, Israel would finally, completely, and eternally, obey God and have all their sins forgiven. This New Covenant, promised in Old Testament times, was fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament: “Take, eat, this is my Body... Drink of this, all of you. This is my Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you, and for many, for the remission of sins.” Gentile Christians are fully included in the New Covenant, as Paul says: “...as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: ⁶ that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel... (Ephesians 3:5-6).