

GOD'S COVENANT Romans 11:13-24

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

The Scripture we deal with in this lesson is one of the more difficult sections of the Epistle to the Romans. It deals with the relationship of Israel as a nation and Gentiles collectively to the Abrahamic covenant. This covenant is among the most important transactions God has made with men, for it contains all the blessings of salvation to all men of all time who believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Some 4,000 years ago God called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees and made an unbreakable covenant with him that would continue forever. It is called the Abrahamic covenant. The offer originally made to Abram appears in Genesis 12:1-3, and nicely summarizes the covenant that God made and confirmed with Abram (Abraham) in Genesis 15, 17 and 22:

“Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee; And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curseth thee: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

This covenant has personal, national and universal blessings connected with it. The personal promise was that Abraham would have a great name and be a blessing to others. The national blessing was that Abraham’s physical seed, the Jews, would be a great nation forever and have a land forever (Gen. 12:1; 13:14-16), and that from this seed would come kings. Abraham probably understood these promises to refer to his own physical seed. The universal promise was that all the families of the earth would be blessed, referring to Messiah who came through the line of Abraham. Apart from Messiah there is no salvation; this part of the covenant relates to Gentiles. Another promise of a universal nature is that those who bless Abraham and his descendants (i.e. the Jews) shall be blessed, while those who curse them shall be cursed of God.

From the Abrahamic covenant we see that God has a purpose for Israel that he must fulfill. When Messiah came to Israel, the nation as a whole rejected him, although a few individuals trusted in Christ, constituting the elect remnant. These elect were the recipients of the covenant blessings.

It is obvious that after Israel rejected Messiah, Jesus Christ sent his apostles to the Gentiles and began to offer them salvation through himself if they would but trust in him. It has been 2,000 years since the apostles spread the gospel to the Gentiles of all nations.

Does this mean that God is finished with Israel as a nation? Will he not fulfill the covenant he made with them at the time of Abraham? Does God still have a purpose for physical, national Israel? In Romans 11:13-24 Paul uses the illustration of the olive tree to show that God does have a future for Israel in his plan for the world, even though now they are being disciplined as a nation for their rejection of Christ.

ISRAEL'S PRESENT AND YET FUTURE POSITION — Romans 11:13-16

“For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office [ministry].” Here Paul speaks to Gentile Christians corporately, not to Israel, and not even to the church at large which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles. His argument focuses on the Gentiles’ opportunity to hear the gospel, which has resulted from Israel’s rejection of Messiah. The two basic thoughts related here are the gospel opportunity for Gentiles and Jews, and the relationship of believing Jews and believing Gentiles to the Abrahamic covenant in the church age.

“If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.” Paul exalts his ministry to the Gentiles in order to provoke some Israelites to jealousy, hoping that this will cause individual Jews to turn to Jesus Christ. Paul never gave up on the Jew for salvation, and neither should we.

“For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?” Israel’s rejection meant the potential reconciling of the world to God through Christ. This is not universalism. Israel’s rejection of Messiah gave Gentiles the opportunity to hear about Christ, so that all who believe could be reconciled to God. Paul indicated that the future conversion of Israel would be like life from the dead and that the world would be blessed through national Israel.

“For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy.” Here “holy” means separation to God, not ethical and moral holiness. The firstfruit of dough would be easily recognized by a student of the Old Testament. “Of the first of your dough ye shall give unto the Lord an heaveoffering in your generations” (Num. 15:21). A hand-full of dough offered to the Lord by the priest was evidence of the worthiness of the whole mass from which it was taken. The whole nation of Israel was originally set apart for God by the call of Abraham and the giving of the covenant promises to him. Therefore, the individuals of the race of Abraham also have a special relationship to God. They are set apart, but not necessarily saved.

“And if the root be holy, so are the branches.” The root refers to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through whom the covenant was made and reaffirmed. The branches refer to physical, national Israel. If the fathers of Israel were set apart to God, so were their physical seed.

WARNING TO GENTILES IN LIGHT OF ISRAEL'S PAST — Romans 11:17-22

We must understand the symbolism Paul uses. The root is Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. The natural branches are Abraham's physical seed or national Israel. The wild branches are Gentiles. The olive tree is Israel:

“The Lord called thy name, A green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit” (Jer. 11:16).

“His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon” (Hos. 14:6).

The place of blessing is to be rightly related to the covenant given to Israel.

“And if some of the branches be broken off.” Many of the physical seed of Abraham have rejected Messiah and have been broken off from the position of blessing under the covenant. “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). Yet, not all physical seed have been cut off. A few individual Jews have trusted in Jesus Christ, forming the elect remnant. Every Jew is born physically under the Abrahamic covenant, but the blessing of the covenant comes only to those who have been “born again” within the covenant.

“And thou, being a wild olive tree [branch], were grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree.” The Gentile, a wild branch, having no natural relationship to the root, can still be grafted into the tree, placed under the covenant — all Gentiles have this opportunity to have a relationship with God through the gospel. Covenant opportunity has now been opened to all Gentiles because of Israel's rejection.

“Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.” This is a warning to Gentiles not be proud because of their opportunity for salvation while Israel is being disciplined. Why? All salvation comes through the Abrahamic covenant, and the Jews are Abraham's descendants. If Gentiles have the opportunity to hear, it is only through the Jew and his background. The place of blessing is Israel and her covenant.

“Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in.” A Gentile might boast that God got rid of Israel in order to bring blessing to Gentiles. But Israel is the apple of God's eye. If Gentiles have anything, it is by pure mercy. God in no way prefers Gentiles to Jews.

“Well; because of unbelief they were broken off.” It was because of Israel's rejection that any Gentile has the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“And thou standest by faith.” Paul goes beyond just speaking about Gentile opportunity to hear about Christ, and says that any Gentile who is saved is saved purely by God’s grace through faith. A Gentile has had no covenant, no promises and no blessing apart from Israel.

“Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenant of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ... Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Eph. 2:11-13,19).

“Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen [Gentiles] through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham... Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed which is Christ... And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:7-9,16,29).

When a Gentile trusts Christ, he becomes Abraham’s spiritual seed by faith, and he is related to the Abrahamic covenant.

“Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.” This is not teaching that one can lose his salvation. Paul is warning Gentiles collectively that they have gospel opportunity now, but that God could cut them out, just like he did national Israel, if they do not take advantage of the opportunity and believe on Jesus Christ.

It is pure grace that any Gentile hears the gospel. Do you realize that millions of Gentiles today have never heard about Jesus Christ; therefore they cannot be saved?

I cannot escape the conclusion that Gentile Christians have been admitted to the ancient commonwealth of Israel, as replacements, as it were, for unbelieving Jews, and they now share with the remaining believing Jews the benefits of the promises of God to Israel. Believing Jews, represented by the good natural branches, did not move from the spiritual blessings of the covenant to Israel. Some were cut off, but not the believing seed in Israel. True, believing Israelites did not move; they were not transferred to a new tree. It was Gentile Christians who became part of the already existing good olive tree (Israel) and who share with the already present natural branches.

Neither can I escape the fact that converted Jews and converted Gentiles in this present age form the church, and these together are spiritual Israel because they believe. The Christian church is a recipient of the covenant blessings to Israel. This does not mean, however, that God does not have a future for national Israel — he does. At the second advent of Jesus Christ, physical Jews alive at that time will be converted and turn to Christ. There is a time coming when Gentiles will no longer dominate the church as they do now, but Jews will believe in substantial numbers and be restored to their position in the ancient commonwealth of Israel. Believing Gentiles will be there also.

PREDICTION OF ISRAEL'S FUTURE — Romans 11:23-24

“And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again.” If Israel will again trust God as a nation, they will be grafted back into the Abrahamic covenant and be in the place of blessing. Paul hints here that Israel has a future, and we know from other parts of the Bible that through the power of God, based on Israel's faith, Israel as a nation will again trust Christ at the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” If God did the hardest thing by grafting Gentiles into the covenant when this was contrary to nature, how much easier will it be for him to put Israel, the natural branches, back into the tree, the covenant? God can and will do this. He has a future for Israel.

CONCLUSION

To how many Gentiles has God shown mercy by giving them gospel opportunity? Multiplied millions have heard about Christ, and have been given the opportunity to become part of the Abrahamic covenant and to receive the blessing God has made available to the world. But they reject!

Gentiles, you may not always have the opportunity to trust Christ that you have now, for one day God will cut off Gentile opportunity and give the blessing back to Israel. The “fulness of the Gentiles” will one day end.

A Gentile without Christ is an alien from Israel, a stranger from the Abrahamic covenant, and without hope and God in this world. You are lost for time and eternity without Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God, and King!