

Lent 5  
Romans 11:11-21  
March 21, 2010

Dear engrafted branches of God's tree through faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote these words to the Christians in Rome mostly Gentile stock. Though these words are old, they are current. God's Word is that way. And the written words God has given us aim to create trust, to maintain trust, and always to increase, to strengthen trust in Jesus as God in the flesh, our Savior from our sin, from death, from the power, influence and control of the devil, and from eternal separation from the God of life and goodness.

Because, when anyone comes to rely on Jesus, satan is always the loser, satan always works to stop people from depending on our Savior or to keep them from ever even beginning to look to our Redeemer for help.

St. Paul aims to humble us with these words and make us realize that

Every Christian Stands by Faith Alone (Faith in Jesus).

The Apostle Paul regularly uses the term 'Israel' in two different ways. Sometimes he simply means the people who physically descended from Jacob and his twelve sons. And you know that Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and the son of Isaac. And you know that God gave Jacob the name Israel. To begin with 'Israel' was the name of but one man (Jacob).

At other times, the Apostle uses the name 'Israel' to mean God's people. These are the people who, by God's kind mercy and immeasurable love, through His Gospel, put their trust in the LORD their eternal Savior. In this way, St. Paul calls even us believing Gentiles Israel, God's people, Abraham's children. All who look to Jesus as their Deliverer, their Prophet, Priest and King, their God are the real Israel.

Of the two uses of the word 'Israel,' the second is far more important because, as John the Baptist pointed out to the physical descendants of Jacob, God could make more physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of the stones if He wanted to, but only repentance and faith in the Savior make anyone spiritual Israel.

Israel, as the rescued people of God, old and new testament times, Jews and Gentiles, are such through faith in Jesus, the Savior, by the LORD's working.

Many physical descendants of the family tree of Abraham were broken off branches. Why? Paul is blunt. "They were broken off because of unbelief."

Unbelief, not relying on Jesus, the One promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David, destroys Israel or prevents a person from even becoming part of Israel, the people of God.

What a tragedy it is throughout so much of Old Testament history. God sent prophet after prophet after prophet to give the people His Word. By His Word, God clearly showed people their need for His help, showed them their sinfulness and guilt. God made the connection between that sin and death, showed them that without His rescue death would become eternal for all people in the form of hell. By His Word, most importantly, God also gave everyone the true, complete solution to sin, guilt and death, that He, the LORD, would come in the flesh and rescue the world from that sin, guilt and death. Because of God's work as Savior, forgiveness and life were and are an offered gift to all. This offer of the Good News is not a lottery, which only very few lucky people receive as a gift. This gift is really already purchased and is now offered to everyone. The Gospel actually says "Here is forgiveness and eternal life. It's for you from Jesus." It's a true gift already paid for by Jesus. It's also not the kind of "free gift" that isn't really free, but only a bonus if you buy or do something else to earn it. Those kinds of "free gifts" are really only promotions to get us to do something else.

The power, wisdom and grace of God is especially, clearly seen in how God kept His promises about the Savior despite human unbelief and wickedness, even unbelief and wickedness on the part of physical Israel.

Despite so many Israelites' turning away from the LORD, rejecting God's Word, God always managed to save a remnant. Around 40 verses in the Old Testament tell about that remnant, the true Israel, the real people of God. That remnant existed by God's gracious forgiveness on account of God's mercy. The LORD called and gathered His remnant as His own flock. He saved them and protected them through terrible times. The LORD Himself would be the King/Shepherd of His remnant, leading them out of their slavery under sin, death and satan to eternal life in heaven. The LORD would motivate and empower them for new living.

Despite so many Israelites of the physical kind rejecting Jesus, when the promised Savior came to them and lived and worked among them, still God's grace, power and wisdom carried out salvation for the whole world. So many screamed "Crucify, crucify Him" yet out of His crucifixion at Jerusalem came forgiveness for all people, the Gentiles, too.

"Because of physical Israel's transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles." Their transgression means riches for the world; their loss means riches for the Gentiles.

But there was a remnant from physical Israel then, too. The Apostle Paul was a prime example. He started out an unbelieving Israelite but Jesus made him a believing Israelite, a true Israelite, an apostle, a missionary to the Gentiles, undoubtedly the greatest missionary of all time.

Really, we Gentile believers, true Israel too, are also a remnant. Most Gentiles do not believe. The unbelievers despise us believers, but God keeps rescuing some, a remnant of the Jews, a remnant of the Gentiles.

To this day we Gentile believers are nourished by the roots, the roots reaching down to the time of Adam and Eve and later to the time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and David. Jesus was born from them, too.

Let us not be arrogant, thinking we are better than anyone else. We were dead and lost until Jesus made us alive with the Gospel. Unbelievers are dead in sin now. The Gospel can make them alive. Only unbelief destroyed Old Testament Israel. God to this day raises some physical descendants of Abraham to life through faith in Jesus. To this day, He raises some Gentiles to life through faith in that Savior. God grafts them into His tree.

We Gentiles are wild olive shoots grafted into God's olive tree. If unbelief removed natural branches, unbelief surely will cut out us wild branches, too. Don't be arrogant, but be humbly, reverently, tremblingly, grateful for God's love towards us Gentiles! We stand only by faith.

God used a believing descendant of Jacob – the Apostle Paul – to carry God's saving Good News to the Gentiles, even designated him as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Let us now, as believing Gentiles, carry the same Gospel to all people, Jews and Gentiles. God will continue to rescue a remnant of Jews and a remnant of Gentiles with His free forgiveness and pardon of all iniquities and guilt by His Gospel and make them His true Israel, children of believing Abraham. What riches! We are Israel, not because of who we are or because of what we do, but only by faith in Jesus Christ, the ultimate Israelite. Amen.