

Gentiles in the Family Tree

The Future of Israel – Part IV

Romans 11:16-25

Introduction – Interpreting a Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech where A is compared to Z or where A is said to be Z.

Those of us who interpret the Bible literally; that is, we approach it historically, grammatically, and theologically, compare scripture to scripture. We believe that the best commentary on scripture is scripture. We therefore interpret figures of speech literally, or normally. Unless the Bible, which is ultimately our best commentary, gives us reason to believe otherwise, we interpret a simile as a simile and a metaphor as a metaphor.

Jesus Christ said, in John, chapter 10, verse 9a,
I am the door . . .

We understand that He is not saying He has three sets of hinges and is made out of wood. We simply understand His point to be, “I am the entryway into everlasting life. You can’t get inside without coming through Me.”

That is an easy one to interpret. A more difficult passage to interpret is in Matthew, chapter 26, verses 26 through 28a, when Christ,

after a blessing, He broke it [bread] and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat, this is My body.” And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant . . .”

If you stop at verse 28, you might become as confused as millions of people throughout the last

seventeen centuries who believe they are eating Christ’s body and drinking His blood. They believe that, in the hands of a priest, the bread and wine somehow become the literal flesh and blood of Christ. With that belief, Christ is sacrificed for sin over and over and over, a million times over each week all around the world.

However, in the next verse, verse 29 of this chapter, Jesus says,

“But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”

In other words, it cannot be Jesus’ literal blood because He said He was going to drink it too. More importantly, He referred to the cup, in this explanatory verse, as “the fruit of the vine,” not blood.

Later, as recorded in John, chapter 6, verses 48 through 53, Jesus said it this way,

“I am the bread of life.

“Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.

“This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?"

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves."

Wow! This does not sound like a metaphor, does it?

Evidently, His answer satisfied the Jewish audience, primarily because they understood His language. The verb forms were very expressive and packed with meaning and clarification.

Let me illustrate the difference between English and Greek. If I said to you, in English, "I just ate my lunch," I could only mean one thing. The meaning would be that my lunch is gone because I ate it.

In the Greek language, however, I could choose verb forms that would mean a number of things. For example, it could mean:

- I just ate my lunch and I'm still in the process of eating it.
- I just ate my lunch and I'm feeling the effects of it (that happens to me when I eat at a Mexican restaurant – I definitely get my money's worth because I feel the effects of it for the rest of the day!).
- I just ate my lunch for the last time, for the rest of my life.

The last example is the verb form that Jesus is using in these verses. Let me re-read this text, in verses 50 and 51, and amplify it according to the verb tense.

"This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it [one time which lasts the rest of their lives] and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread [one time which will last the rest of their lives] they will live forever; . . ."

This is a metaphor, not describing communion, but salvation.

How many times do you take communion? Once, and it lasts the rest of your life? No. You take it every time it is offered.

How many times are you saved? Once, and the effects of that transaction last forever.

What do other scriptures say about the sacrifice of Christ?

Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 10, says,

. . . we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Verse 12 says,

but He having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time . . .

(It is as if the inspired writer anticipated the doctrinal error that would hold to re-sacrificing the body of Christ),

. . . sat down at the right hand of God

In other words, He finished His priestly role.

No Old Testament priest ever sat down. There were no chairs in the holy place for the priests. They were always up and moving about, doing their duties of temporary atonement that had to be repeated over and over again. But Christ, both our High Priest and perfect, final Sacrifice, offered Himself once for all and then, sat down at the right hand of the Father.

When Jesus Christ said from the cross, "It is finished," He meant just that. He did not say, "This is My first sacrifice . . . to be experienced over and over again"; He said, "This is My one and only."

"It is finished," or "tetelestai" in the Greek, means, "I've paid for sin in full!" It does not mean, "I've just made the first payment for sin, and there are millions of payments left to be made." No. Christ meant, "This is the first and final payment for sin." – "It is finished."

I cannot tell you how thrilling it has been over the years to explain the finality of Christ's sacrifice to searching individuals who have come to this church.

My new members class typically has ten to fifteen different denominations represented. The class I started last Sunday night is no exception. There are Presbyterian, Lutheran, Brethren, Wesleyan, Methodist, Mennonite, Alliance, Mormon, and Catholic backgrounds.

I have to tell you, and I will eventually finish my introduction, last Sunday night, I asked my new class of around one hundred thirty people, how they came to this church. I asked, "How many of you came because you were invited by a friend or acquaintance?"

I was going to use their show of hands to encourage them that that is the way the church grows – by personal invitation. However, only a few hands went up. I was surprised. So I asked, "Well, how

many of you came on your own, without even being invited by anyone; you just showed up?"

At least one hundred of them raised their hands. That completely ruined my illustration, but it was quite fascinating.

In this new member "GreenHouse" class, we have one of the largest number of people who have come to this church from the Catholic church that we have ever had. In fact, one new member said to me some time ago, "You know, we ought to start a small group ministry for all the people at Colonial who left the Catholic church. We could discuss our past and search the scriptures in relation to what we have been taught."

I say, "Go for it. If you want to do that, call me . . . in fact, don't even bother with me, I don't want to slow you down. Call the office and we'll put an announcement in the Communiqué. You can start meeting."

We have a growing number of Jewish men and women who have come to Christ in this church. It has been suggested that we have a similar small group ministry for them. It would help to encourage them in their faith, especially in light of the isolation they may feel from their families because of their newfound faith.

This is the church for people from all walks of life.

I had lunch recently with a former drug addict whose life has been changed by Jesus Christ. He has been clean for, if I remember correctly, around twenty to twenty-four months. He told me his story of the way another believer in this church challenged and disciplined him. They brought him to church where his heart was brought to life in Christ. It was amazing to hear his story and to see that he is now drug free, growing in Christ, finishing specialized training in a profession, getting a job, and beginning a wonderful new life in Christ.

The believing community of people sitting around you have many different backgrounds. I think of Paul, who wrote to a group of believers and said, in I Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 9 and 10,

. . . neither fornicators, . . . idolaters, adulterers, . . . homosexuals, . . . thieves, . . . drunkards . . . will inherit the kingdom of God.

Then what does Paul say, in verse 11?

Such were some of you; but you were sanctified [washed], but you were justified in

the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God.

This is what the church is all about – redeemed, repentant sinners, who have eaten the bread of life and drunk from the fountain of His blood, and found forgiveness for sin – past, present, and future – all paid for when Jesus Christ said, "It is finished." The redeemed are those who come to Christ like beggars. They have nothing to offer and simply ask for that meal of flesh and blood – representing Christ's sacrifice and offer of salvation.

What a powerful metaphor that is that speaks of everlasting life for those who have come to Christ.

Interpreting a Metaphor of Gentiles in the Tree

Now the apostle Paul uses a different set of metaphors to illustrate the nation Israel and the Gentile nations of the world.

Everything we just covered about flesh and blood/bread and wine was purposefully given to provide a quick primer on the interpretation of a metaphor. One of the key principles to remember is not to interpret and apply every detail of a metaphor.

Again, in response to Jesus' words, "I am the door," we do not need to sit around and guess how tall the door was, what kind of wood He was talking about – oak or cherry or mahogany. That is not the point. A metaphor usually has one or maybe two main points. The rest of the analogy cannot be strictly interpreted without getting into strange anomalies and doctrinal error.

Now, let us read the paragraph in Romans, chapter 11, verses 16 through 25. Then I will fill in some blanks.

If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree,

do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.

You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."

Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear;

for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either.

Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.

For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

Four parts to this metaphor

Let me explain what the four different pieces of this metaphor are referring to.

The first fruits or piece of dough and the root of the tree is Abraham

1. The first fruits or piece of dough and the root of the tree is Abraham.

In verse 16, Paul refers to the lump of dough or the first fruits as holy. The Jews would have immediately recognized this as a reference to the offering of firstfruits in which the priest took some of the dough from the larger lump and offered it to God.

Paul was making the point that if the lump offered to God was acceptable, the rest would naturally be accepted as well. The first fruit was Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, and he was accepted before God. Thus it was natural to consider his descendants to be accepted before God as well.ⁱ

Of course, the metaphor delivers the news that some of Abraham's descendants were cut off by their unbelief.

In Genesis, God promised that Abraham's descendants would bring forth the Redeemer – God

in Jewish flesh. So, the first fruits or dough and the root of the tree spells the beginning of that redemptive purpose.

The lump and the olive tree represent the blessing of God

2. The lump from which the dough came and the olive tree which came from the root represent the blessing of God.

This divine blessing was primarily experienced by Israel in the former dispensation or era of God's management of time. Now, in this dispensation, this divine blessing is primarily experienced by Gentiles.

Let me add a comment at this point. Chapter 11 of Romans does not specifically address the church. The church, as a corporate body, is not mentioned in these verses. Do not confuse the olive tree with the church.

In fact, it does not save anyone to be in this olive tree.ⁱⁱ

Missing this point will lead you to believe you can lose your salvation – you can be cut off. It is obvious from this text that unbelieving Jews experienced the blessing of God and unbelieving Gentiles today experience the common grace of God as well. If you apply the olive tree to salvation, then when you read verse 22, which says,

. . . if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

. . . you will say, "Well, I guess I can lose my salvation."

The olive tree is not the church and it is not salvation. It represents the blessing of God through Abraham that, first, went to the Jewish nation. They did not believe and God judged them by setting them aside.

Notice throughout this passage that Paul is addressing the Gentiles as a whole. He says:

- . . . *[the offer of] salvation has come to the Gentiles . . .* (verse 11b);
- . . . *[there are] riches for the Gentiles . . .* (verse 12b);
- . . . *I am speaking to you who are Gentiles . . .* (verse 13a).

Paul is saying, in effect, "If the Gentiles, to whom the offer of the gospel is now being advanced, refuse to believe, they will miss their opportunity for

divine blessing, just as Israel, as a whole, missed theirs, and they will be cut off.”

The cultivated branches represent Israelites

3. The cultivated branches represent Israelites in general.

The grafted wild olive branches represent Gentiles

4. The grafted wild olive branches represent Gentiles in general.

I think this is the best way to give this to you, so that you can, if you wish, study further and deeper beyond today.

Three additional points to remember about this metaphor

Let me say some of the same things in another way to clarify this metaphor even more. I will give three additional points to remember, as you study this passage.

Some Israelites have been temporarily cut off the tree because of unbelief

1. Some Israelites have been temporarily cut off the tree because of unbelief (verses 17 and 20).

In other words, they were removed from experiencing God’s blessing.

Now there are some modern cults, who call themselves Christians, who take these verses to say that there are ten lost tribes of Israel that dissolved into the Anglo-Saxon people. This view is referred to as British-Israelism. It sounds intriguing, but a casual look at the prophet’s description of the future reveals a number of references to all the tribes of Israel. Furthermore, Jesus refers to a future judgment of all twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:27-29).

Gentiles have been grafted into a position of blessing

2. Gentiles have been grafted into a position of blessing.

Paul uses the illustration of grafting to picture Gentiles being placed in a position of blessing. Notice verse 17.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in

among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree,

I want to admit to you, the challenge I had in understanding this text was that I have absolutely no experience or knowledge of grafting or working with fruit bearing trees. I cannot get grass to grow, much less understand this marvel of horticulture. I spent several hours studying this subject just to get a grip on what Paul meant.

Let me describe how the practice of grafting olive trees worked. The farmer took a healthy olive branch and grafted it into the wild olive tree. They never took a wild olive branch and grafted it into a healthy olive tree because that would ruin the tree from the graft down.

However, that is what Paul said happens. God does something “unnatural,” so to speak; He goes against nature (verse 24). In other words, God takes the wild Gentile branch and puts him into the root of Abraham so he could, not become a Jew, but become a partaker of the rich root of God’s blessing.

Instead of ruining the tree (God’s place of divine blessing), this graft provides blessing to the Gentile.

Let me add this important point before going to the next point – every true believer is in this tree (of divine blessing), but everyone in the tree is not a believer.

Israel will be grafted back in later

3. Israel will be grafted back in later (verses 23 and 26).

As God moves to restore Israel, He plans to reconnect them to divine blessing. This is a reference to a period of time during the tribulation when God is both severe with Israel – nearly thirty percent of the nation is wiped out – and kind – the nation is restored. This time, they see the Messiah coming in the clouds as the tribulation comes to a close, and they believe and enter the millennial kingdom.

Remember, this passage is basically answering the main question of, “What happens to Israel in the future?” (verses 1, 15, and 25)

The time of divine blessing for Gentiles is also a record of unbelief. Verse 25 informs us that the time of the Gentiles will come to a close as the bride of Christ is completed. At that time, only a minority of Gentile peoples will have believed.

Christ predicted, in Matthew, chapter 7, verses 13 and 14,

. . . for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

We have studied the history of the Jew and their disbelief of Christ. Even now, the Gentile nations of the world show utter disregard for the gospel.

You can trace the decline of belief among the Gentile nations over the course of the last two thousand years.

The gospel began in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. Paul's missionary journeys brought great fruit in places like Derbe, Ephesus, Sardis, and Philadelphia. By the year 113, the Roman governor of Bithynia complained to the Roman emperor Trajan that this new faith was affecting the older worship patterns. People were neglecting the ancient gods, and the temple revenues had fallen off.

Today, Turkey and the surrounding area has totally abandoned Christianity in favor of Islam. The gospel has effectively been snuffed out.

Travel to North Africa, a place where Tertullian and Origen and Athanasius once lived. The great theological centers were developed there in the second and third centuries. St. Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the early church, led the North African church.

Today, North Africa is dominated by Islam. People have long since abandoned the Messiah of Athanasius and Augustine.

Go over to Italy, where the great Council of Nicaea took place in the fourth century. The church prospered, but eventually became corrupt, which sparked the reformation. John Calvin explained the abandonment of the gospel of God's grace by the church in Rome, by applying Romans, chapter 11, to describe its decay.

Go into Europe, the place of leading sixteenth century theologians, vibrant churches and schools. Today, Germany, Switzerland, Holland and France are among the hardest soils to penetrate with the gospel. I know missionaries in France who say it takes several years to simply develop in a Frenchman the foundation whereby he begins to ask about his soul. Today, the cathedrals of Europe are gilded graveyards. Less than four percent of Europeans attend a service, even on religious holidays.

The church in England once held, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the power

points of the gospel. Modern missions was born there as an Englishman named William Carey left for India. Charles Spurgeon preached to ten thousand every Sunday . . . schools and seminaries produced leaders, thinkers and missionaries. Today, church attendance is slightly better than Europe . . . the country has largely forgotten its Christian heritage.ⁱⁱⁱ

America is following along. Already the most popular churches in America are theme shows where the pastors are prone to quote business leaders rather than scripture; where the pastors are prone to follow motivational leaders and marketing strategies rather than the great commission.

One evangelical leader scoffed at the idea of Bible exposition when he told a reporter that he would never get up in front of his congregation and read some verses and then explain what they meant. It was as if to say, "How old fashioned is that?"

A study of the western world reveals that the fall of Gentile nations from the rich blessing of God is unmistakable.

That does not mean it is over. Right now the church in China is becoming a powerhouse, though persecuted. Its eighty million believers are already sending missionaries to other parts of the world. Other Asian countries are sending out missionaries as well. Some of these missionaries are being sent to America.

Application

Let me give three exhortations as we apply some timeless truths to believers today.

Do not be arrogant – genuine faith should produce humility before others and reverence before God

1. Do not be arrogant – genuine faith should produce humility before others and reverence before God (verse 20b).

Look at verses 18 and 20b.

do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. . . . Do not be conceited, but fear;

The Greek word for "conceited" means, "high thoughts". So being "conceited" means, "thinking high thoughts of yourself".

"Don't be conceited," Paul says to those experiencing God's blessing. Instead, Paul says, "to fear, or to show reverence".

Being conceited is thinking high thoughts about yourself. Being humbly reverential is thinking high thoughts about God.

Let me ask you a question. How much time do you spend thinking about yourself? How much time do you spend thinking about God?!

Do not be led astray – genuine truth about God is not one-sided

2. Do not be led astray – genuine truth about God is not one-sided. Paul speaks of both the kindness and severity of God in verse 22.

The world would rather have us only talk of our God as a God of love and kindness. He is that too! But He also is a God of wrath and severity.

All I can do is exhort you to take advantage of this era, this dispensation of grace and opportunity for the Gentiles. Yes, the invitation of grace is open to the Jew as well, but, unlike any other time in world history, the Gentile is being offered the free gift of salvation, by grace through faith in Christ.

Do not be led astray – anyone who tells you that God is only love, does not know the God of the Bible. He is both kind and severe.

Do not be apathetic – genuine believers are challenged to genuinely change

3. Do not be apathetic – genuine believers are challenged to genuinely change.

I do not know where the expression came from which we often use when we say, “You’re out of your tree,” or “You obviously fell out of your tree,” but it fits Romans, chapter 11.

Living a cultivated life is the challenge of the believer. Paul implies, in verse 24, that you, the Gentile believer, were once a wild olive branch. As such, you were unable to do anything for God; unable to produce any olive oil – any spiritual fruit.

However, now you have been grafted into the blessing and dignity of God’s grace.

I could not help but think of that classic play, “My Fair Lady,” where a dirty, rough, crass flower

girl is taken off the streets of London and brought into the home of a gentleman who is determined to change her into a lady of refinement. He works with her diction and her wardrobe and her bearing. Finally, she fools everyone and, in fact, does indeed become a lady.

There is a sense that we, as believers, have been placed into the culture of grace. It is an academy of spiritual refinement. It should affect our vocabulary; it should refine our dress. I do not mean that we should run around in bow ties and cumber-buns, but the culture of God’s grace should impact our bearing, our modesty, our dignity, our relationships. That is what chapter 12 is all about. This is how we are to live, now that we have been inducted into the riches of Christ.

Look briefly at chapter 12, verses 9 through 13.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;

not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,

contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

Skip to verses 17 and 18.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

I have no idea how long it is going to take to get through chapter 12! It is packed.

We are not to be apathetic. God has taken us off the streets, cleaned us up, and lavished on us His grace. He intends to change everything about us.

We who have eaten the bread of life and found forgiveness in the fountain of His blood – we are in the tree. One day, we will be with Christ in His kingdom and beyond.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/16/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness from Heaven (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 197.

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- ⁱⁱ Alva J. McClain, Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace (BMH Books, 1973), p. 201.
- ⁱⁱⁱ James M. Boice, Romans: Volume 3 (Baker Books, 1993), p. 1352.