

The Relationship Between Faith and Obedience (part-seven of a seven-part study)

In providing us with a big picture of God's redemptive purpose, the apostle Paul uses a unique metaphor in Romans 11:17-24; that of an olive tree with roots and branches. In spite of the various interpretations of this passage, it seems that the most common-sense conclusion in regard to Paul's intent, is that the analogy represents three covenants, with our positive participation contingent on faith and obedience. The immediate purpose of the symbolism concerns Gentile arrogance toward their fellow Jewish Christians (vv17-18). So, Paul portrays the Abrahamic Covenant as the root producing a tree and branches. The natural branches represent the nation of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant. The wild branches are Gentile Christians who have gained entry into the Abrahamic tree by being grafted in against nature, through the agency of a New Covenant. Their new found opportunity is the by-product of Israel's **unbelief** (v20) and **disobedience** (v30); resulting from the outreach of the gospel (vv13-15). Notice how the apostle describes the negative circumstance of Christ's rejection by Israel and its consequential positive outcome for the entire world, in Romans 11:12 –

“Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!”

In order to stem the tide of growing Gentile resentment toward Jewish unbelief, Paul reveals this critical additional aspect of God's redemptive plan: Jesus Christ will return, for the express purpose of restoring Israel to its promised place in His Millennial Kingdom on earth (Romans 11:25-27; cf. Isaiah 59:20-21); coupled with a practical admonition in Romans 11:19-21 –

“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.”

This early church rebuke serves a two-fold contemporary purpose. First, it should place a restraint upon the vile racism being expressed in our day, by so-called Christians, in the form of anti-Semitism. They seem to have forgotten that Jesus is Jewish! But the warning here should not be misinterpreted in regard to any potential loss of salvation due to a wavering unbelief or willful disobedience. Instead, Paul is issuing a caution to the Roman church collectively. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews does the same in warning Jewish believers, by setting forth the example of the Exodus generation, which lost its opportunity for entering and conquering the Promised Land, due to unbelief and disobedience (Hebrews 3:17-19). With Paul in Romans 11, the example is that of the nation as a whole being temporarily replaced by the Church in the plan and purpose of God, due to the rejection of their Messiah, which now extends to all of us. How? The loss of *usefulness* can also occur in a local church, as well as with an individual Christian, if unbelief and/or disobedience becomes the predominant factor in one's life (Revelation 2:5; 3:19-22). The apostle's illustration only confirms the bottom-line application of this entire study:

“Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey!”

THERE WILL BE A FOLLOW-UP BONUS POST ON SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12
ENTITLED: “CLARIFYING THE CONFUSION BETWEEN THE COVENANTS”