

080224 Olive Branches: Theological Implications 23/08 February 24, 2008GG
Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Olive Branches: Theological Implications

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? For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. ([Ro 11:15-19](#))

Often Bible students, ever so sincerely, form interpretations of symbolic passages and then force the literal passages in the Bible to harmonize with their view of the symbolic verses. This appears particularly in the contemporary view of eschatology (the doctrine of final or last things) and the modern view of dispensational teaching, LaHaye's *Left Behind* series of novels or Scofield's Study Bible notes as just two examples. Both of these teachings borrowed their ideas from J. N. Darby and the Plymouth Brethren; Darby published his new view of dispensationalism in 1827, the first time in the history of Christian doctrine that the idea ever appeared. The hopeless confusion of forming views of the symbolic passages and using those ideas to force an interpretation onto the literal passages creates confusion. For example, ask ten different people what they believe about a particular part of contemporary dispensational teachings, and you will typically get ten different answers! They may start with a few points of basic agreement, but they will soon drift off in multiple directions. Consider the confusion within contemporary dispensational belief as to when the "rapture" will occur. Will it occur before, during, or after the "great tribulation"? And all of these beliefs in a "ruptured rapture" miss the obvious point of Jesus' simple, straightforward teaching that the Second Coming will be a single day in which all humanity shall be raised simultaneously.

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation. ([Joh 5:28-29](#))

Notice Jesus' words carefully. There is only one epochal "hour" in which both righteous and wicked shall "hear his voice...come forth..." Jesus' teaching is that the whole of humanity, saved and unsaved, shall be resurrected at the same moment, not that some shall be secretly "raptured" while others remain behind.

Proper Biblical interpretation requires the mirror opposite approach. We should firmly anchor our understanding of Biblical doctrine in the literal passages, especially the very clear passages, and then form our interpretations of the symbolic portions of Scripture in harmony with the literal.

In our study chapter, Romans the eleventh chapter, Paul uses the analogy of an olive tree and the pruning of "tame" branches and the grafting into the trunk of "wild" branches to teach a central truth regarding God's judgment against first century Jews and the simultaneous enlargement of gospel blessings to non-Jews, to Gentiles.

What is the "big picture" point that Paul intends to teach with this analogy? Does he intend that all Jews are rejected from God, including eternal salvation? Does he intend that all Gentiles are included in God's eternal saving work? Or does he refer to certain Jews of a particular category and certain Gentiles of a different particular category? If so, what are these two categories?

Based on the clear teaching of Scripture ([Ro 8:38-39](#) as just one prime example), nothing can separate

those whom God has chosen to eternal life from Him and His all-conquering love. Nothing! Therefore if we interpret the pruning of the “tame” or natural olive branches, the Jews, in the eleventh chapter as being equivalent to their being once embraced in God’s election, but now cut off, we impose a hopeless contradiction onto Paul and Scripture. If we accept the supernatural origin and harmony of all Scripture, then we must look for an interpretation of the olive tree and its branches that harmonize with this central truth of God’s undefeatable love.

Given the dialectical form of the whole Roman letter, we should view Paul’s reasoning throughout the letter in much the same way an attorney would look at a legal contract or a legal brief that he might present to a court. It is common in such formal documents that the author carefully define key terms early in the document and that he consistently use that single definition throughout the brief. In [Ro 2:28-29](#) Paul concisely defined his intended meaning for the term “Jew.” Whether we examine the third chapter or the eleventh chapter, we should accept that definition unless Paul specifically redefines the term in a different context, something that no where appears subsequently in the Roman letter. We should then conclude that the Jews of whom Paul writes in the eleventh chapter are in fact regenerate elect Jews, but Jews whose unbelief in Jesus as their Messiah brought God’s rejection upon them in some form that stops distinctly and categorically short of eternal separation. By the same logical direction we should interpret “Gentiles” in this context in a similar manner.

From what did God “cut off” these unbelieving Jews? To what did God give to the Gentiles under consideration in this chapter? Given Paul’s description of the Jews whom God cut off ([Ro 11:28](#), enemies to the gospel, but beloved for the sake of God’s promises to the ancient Jewish fathers), I believe that the Jews under consideration were in fact numbered in God’s election, but they did not believe that Jesus was their promised Messiah, the specific reason for their being cut off from the blessings of the gospel. And given the fact that Gentiles were to replace the “cut off” Jewish unbelieving branches, I further suggest that these Gentiles were those who embraced the truth of the gospel and directed their lives according to the “righteousness of faith.” This interpretation is consistent with Paul’s statement that the branch is holy because the root is holy, a conclusion that applies in Paul’s analogy to both branches, not just one.

Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Underlying this Gentile claim we see a certain deterministic mystical explanation. It is as if the Gentiles whom Paul here represents believed that God could not possibly bless both Jews and Gentiles equally, so they claim that God arbitrarily cut off the Jews so that He might graft in the Gentiles. In the verses following Paul will categorically reject this deterministic and arbitrary explanation. Further he will specifically attribute the reason for the cutting off of the Jews in question to their unbelief, not to a mystical divine decree. The cause of their being cut off was in them, not in God.

We occasionally so focus our thoughts on the eleventh chapter of Romans on unbelieving Jews that we overlook this point. In this verse and in his answer following Paul rebukes the arrogance of Gentiles as categorically as he rebuked the prideful unbelief of Jews in earlier verses.

It appears that the primary distinguishing factor between the two olive branches in this context lies in the belief or the unbelief of the individuals involved. The Jews in question were quite religious. We should not overlook that they believed in the God of the Old Testament and in the teachings of the Old Testament. They “stumbled at that stumblingblock” of Jesus, God Incarnate, being born of humble parents as well as His humiliating death on a Roman cross. Albert Barnes, in his *Notes on the Bible*, explains the difficulty that many Jews struggled to understand regarding their own prophetic writings regarding the Messiah.

There is the fullest evidence that the passage was applied by the early Jews, both before and after the birth of Jesus, to the Messiah, until they were pressed by its application to Jesus of Nazareth, and were

compelled ill self-defense to adopt some other mode of interpretation; and even after that, it is evident, also, that not a few of the better and more pious portion of the Jewish nation still continued to regard it as descriptive of the Messiah. So obvious is the application to the Messiah, so clear and full is the description, that many of them have adopted the opinion that there would be two Messiahs, one a suffering Messiah, and the other a glorious and triumphant prince and conqueror. The Old Testament plainly foretold that the Messiah would be 'God and man; exalted and debased; master and servant; priest and victim; prince and subject; involved in death, and yet a victor over death; rich and poor; a king, a conqueror, glorious; a man of griefs, exposed to infirmities, unknown, and in a state of abjection and humiliation.' (Calmet.) All these apparently contradictory qualities had their fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; but they were the source of great difficulty to the Jews, and have led to the great variety of opinions which have prevailed among them in regard to him.¹³⁵

Notice that the Jews' struggle with both a conquering and a suffering Messiah was so intense that many of them concluded that their Old Testament holy writings must in fact be predicting two distinct Messiahs, one who would suffer and one who would conquer. As Barnes rightly observes, only in the Lord Jesus Christ do both aspects of Old Testament prophecies find their fulfillment.

These unbelieving Jews were not pagans or depraved people. They were in all likelihood very religious and very dedicated to their faith and their sincere understanding of their holy writings. It is a grievous error for us to send folks to hell—literally in our own esteem of them—simply because they embrace a different view of God than we believe. No doubt we shall all encounter some major “conversions” from our own unbelief and errors when we arrive in glory. If our sincere misunderstanding doesn't prevent us from entering heaven, why should we impose eternal ruin onto others who have failed in other points to understand the gospel correctly?

Paul clearly identifies the terrible consequences of unbelief. These Jews who rejected Christ were cut off by God from the mercies and blessings reserved for those who worship Christ as their Savior. He also predicted the same consequence for Gentiles who having once believed might turn away from the truth. Paul is clear that the reason anyone, Jew or Gentile, might be denied God's temporal blessings in the gospel is because of their own choice to reject Christ. Their eternal salvation remains secure. However, the assurance of faith, conditioned on believing in Christ Jesus, is withheld. From the eternal perspective, they are beloved but they are nevertheless rejected from the blessings of temporal salvations in the gospel because of their willful failure to embrace Christ.