

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 11: 17-22

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. This week, we will read Romans 11:17–36. Today, we will read verses 17-22.

Last week we read the first half of Romans chapter 11, where Paul emphasized the principle and order of God's election in grace. God's election is according to the principle of the remnant — this is true for Israel, and it is also true for the Gentile church. From this, the church can be helped by Israel's history to learn how to become the remnant that follows God by faith.

As for the order of God's election, Paul distinguishes between Israel and the church. God first called Israel, but when Israel forsook God, He chose a remnant from among them. From this remnant came Jesus Christ, who fulfilled God's redemptive plan. After redemption was accomplished, man could, by believing in Jesus Christ, become a child of God and be gathered into the church. The church thus became the elect people of the New Covenant.

The first church was in Jerusalem, composed mainly of Israelites. God's intention, however, was that the gospel be preached to the ends of the earth. When the church began to be established among the Gentiles, the Israelites fell behind. Paul recognized this as the wisdom of God's election — God was temporarily setting Israel aside until the end of the age, when He would again receive them.

Paul concluded the first half of the chapter with the ordinance of the grain offering: "For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy." (Romans 11:16a) For the Israelites, the term "firstfruit" in the original Greek also carries the meaning of "first portion" — referring to their patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because the patriarchs were holy, they had a holy heritage. Even though their descendants stumbled, God would not cast them away; as long as they repented and followed in the footsteps of their forefathers' faith, God would receive them again.

For the saints of the New Covenant, Christ, having risen from the dead, has become our firstfruits. Since Christ is holy, we who believe in Him also have a holy standing, and we walk on the path of sanctification, producing the reality of holiness in our lives. Our offering is toward God so that we may be accepted by Him.

Then Paul continues: “If the root is holy, so are the branches.” (Romans 11:16b) With this declaration, he begins the second half of the chapter, focusing on how, in God’s eternal purpose, Israel and the Gentile church together bear testimony to God’s kingdom. Paul uses the example of the olive tree to illustrate how Israel and the church are mutually dependent, jointly bearing witness for God.

In the Old Testament, Israel was the olive tree, God’s witness on the earth. The root of the olive tree was the patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham’s calling and following in faith, Isaac’s obedience and inheritance in faith, and Jacob’s striving and transformation in faith together formed the strong root of the olive tree. A tree can only grow tall if its roots are deep. A healthy root draws in the necessary nourishment for the branches to flourish. If the root is pure, the branches will also be pure. The patriarchs were the root; the Israelites were the branches. With this understanding, we come to verse 17.

Verse 17: “And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree.”

“Some of the branches were broken off” — these branches refer to the unbelieving Israelites. The Gentiles, originally unrelated to God, are represented by the wild olive tree. Through the gospel of Jesus Christ coming to the Gentiles, believers from among the nations were grafted into this olive tree to share in the root and fatness of the olive tree. The word fatness literally means “richness” or “abundance,” signifying the all-inclusive riches of Christ.

Paul’s metaphor of grafting describes how Gentile believers were joined to the olive tree to become God’s testimony on earth. To be such a testimony of God’s kingdom involves six key characteristics:

1. It is of life — joined to God's life. The grafting process requires cutting the branch off the wild olive tree and likewise cutting open the cultivated tree to insert the new branch, binding them together so that life may flow. Once the new branch is joined to the tree, it can receive nourishment from the root. Thus, the first feature is a living connection through which life can flow and supply.

2. It is of resurrection. During the flood, when Noah sent out a dove to see if the waters had abated, the dove returned in the evening with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its mouth (Genesis 8:11). Noah knew then that the waters had receded and that the olive tree was alive and sprouting again — a testimony of resurrection: death has passed, and life has come.

3. It is spiritual. The olive tree produces olives for oil. In Scripture, oil consistently symbolizes the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the testimony of the olive tree is inherently spiritual.

4. It is rooted. The experiences of the patriarchs — being called, following, obeying, inheriting, striving, and being transformed by faith — must also become our experiences and our testimony.

5. It is in fellowship. The rich sap from the root continually flows into the newly grafted branch as its supply. Only through such fellowship can we receive the riches of Christ as our timely help.

6. It is for fruit-bearing. The purpose of grafting is to bear fruit. The wild olive cannot produce good olives; it must be grafted into the tree that shares in God's life so that it may bear fruit pleasing to God.

A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, wrote a poem containing this line: "Base wood grafted to a precious tree — small becomes great, bitter turns sweet." We were once worthless wild wood, but God has grafted us into this precious olive tree. Now we can bear large and sweet fruit for God's and man's enjoyment, becoming a beautiful testimony of God.

Verse 18: “Do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.”

Here Paul warns the Gentile believers, the newly grafted branches, not to boast against the natural branches — the Israelites. They must understand that it is not they who support the root, but the root that supports them. Salvation is of the Jews; the patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — are the root of this olive tree, upholding and nourishing us. Therefore, we should be filled with gratitude and learn from their example in Scripture: Like Abraham, be called and follow in faith; like Isaac, obey and inherit in faith; like Jacob, labor and be transformed by faith through the Holy Spirit.

All that we have is by inheritance; we are but sinners saved by grace. Therefore, we have nothing to boast of. As the Lord said to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Paul responded, “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” This, too, should be our prayer — to boast only in our weakness, that Christ’s power may rest upon us.

Verses 19–20: “You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear.”

The branches — the unbelieving Israelites — were broken off especially so that we Gentiles might be grafted in. They were broken off because of their unbelief, and we were grafted in because of faith. Moreover, it is by faith that we continue to stand in this position. Faith is not based on our ability, nor on our strengths, nor on our efforts, nor on our works; but purely by grace through faith. Therefore, we must not be proud but fear. And what should we fear?

Verse 21: “For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.”

Paul's warning is direct and solemn. He speaks from the perspective of God's testimony. God created man to represent Him, to rule over His creation, and to manifest Him — that is, to be His testimony. When the unbelieving Israelites lost their testimony, God did not spare them but cut them off to graft in others. Likewise, if we who have been grafted in lose faith and fail to bear witness for God, He will not spare us either.

Beloved brothers and sisters, we must heed Paul's warning, but we must also rightly understand his meaning. To be "cut off" means to lose the supply of life and the position of testimony — not the loss of eternal salvation. It means being saved but not overcoming, losing our share in God's testimony.

Here we must recognize God's sovereignty: God can graft in, and God can cut off; and God can also graft back again — all according to His sovereign will. Yet His sovereignty operates in His foreknowledge, so man has a corresponding responsibility: to maintain faith and continue drawing supply from the root. Faith always produces the fruit of virtue; unfruitful and lazy branches God will not spare.

This fruitfulness is what Peter describes in 2 Peter 1:4–8 — participating in the divine nature and producing spiritual fruit: "... giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." The unfruitful branches are those God will not spare; they will be cut off.

Verse 22: "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off."

Love is God's nature, and His love toward man is expressed as kindness. Righteousness is also God's nature, and His actions, according to the law of righteousness, display His severity. Therefore, we must have a balanced view of God — He is both kind and severe. God is neither a permissive indulgent being nor a

tyrannical ruler. He is severe toward those who fall, but kind toward those who believe. Since we entered by faith, we must continue in His kindness, that He may always remain kind to us.

Israel fell because of unbelief, and God's severity has been upon them for nearly two thousand years; only a small remnant of Israel has received grace and salvation. Let us learn from Israel's example — not to fall through unbelief, lest we too be cut off and face God's severity. Whether we experience God's kindness or His severity depends on our faith in Him. May the Lord help us.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for placing Paul's solemn warning here for our sake. We were wild olive branches, yet through the gospel You have grafted us into the true olive tree to receive the rich supply from its root. May our lives be joined to God's life so that we may bear good fruit and be Your testimony.

Dear Lord, preserve in us a humble heart. It is not that we are better than others, but that we have received abundant grace through faith. Keep us in a spirit of reverent fear and in the understanding that Your purpose is for the church to be Your testimony on earth. To those who remain in Your kindness, You are kind; to those who fall, You are severe. Bless the church where I am, that it may remain in Your kindness and be a testimony to all around us — that we are Your blessed children, Your people, and priests of the gospel, bringing those who believe to be grafted into the testimony of this olive tree. Bless my church. We pray in the Holy Name of Jesus Christ.