

Series: Romans

What's the story with God & Israel?

Introduction

Good morning everyone! Today we are launching season two of our series in Romans! We took a break for a while to look at our church values, but we're back in it - the epic book of Romans!

Today we are going to cover a lot of ground in Romans Chapters 9, 10, and 11. To do that we are going to jump around a lot, we won't cover every verse, but stick with me, this message is a special one, as we look at the story of God's special relationship with Israel and us. I've called the message;

Whats the story with God & Israel?

I pray that today, you will receive a fresh appreciation of God's work in the world, his story with Israel, and how we fit in to his plan.

To help us today, beside me, you will see a very special tree. A friend of mine very kindly agreed to let me borrow it for the weekend. This Bonzai is special for a few reasons;

Firstly, it is fifty years old. It's weird to be standing next to a tree that is actually older than me! Respect!

But secondly, it is also special because has taken a lot of patience, hard work, and love, to cultivate it over a few years, to get it to this point. It has been pruned, shaped with wire, repotted time and time again, and lovingly nourished. So it is very valuable.

This one is not even the oldest and most valuable, but it is still worth about R8 000. I know what you're thinking, that can cover my kids school fees. Don't get any ideas, I am fiercely protecting it until I get it back to my friend!

Thirdly, it is also special, because this is an Olive tree. Olive tree's have a lot of significance for us as Christian believers. In many ways, Olive tree's are important within our history.

In the ancient world, the olive tree was very important in life, for business, for life. You would use the olive oil for cooking, for medical purposes, even to light your lamp! There were no triple AAA batteries!

And if you had a really good olive tree, then you were really blessed, because a good olive tree could last for 300-400 years, and not just bless you, but it would bless generations of your family. I can't even think of things that still last 400 days today. A laptop lasts 10 years if you are lucky.

And so in the bible, you see a lot about olive trees, and olive oil and olive presses. Even on the night that Jesus was betrayed, in the Garden of Gethsemane, that was literally in an olive grove.

And so where we pick up in Romans today, is with the big idea, that God created the nation of Israel, and this amazing tree that I have with us today, is going to help us understand this special relationship. Because just like this tree, God created the nation of Israel, he loved it, he cared for it, he cultivated it, and then through Israel, he then brought his son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Amazing.

Now here's the challenge we face in our passages in Romans today, although there were Jewish people who believed in him, and followed him, the majority rejected Jesus. And so the big question is, how could this happen? If God loved Israel so much, and had brought them so far with this long and rich history, how is it possible that they rejected Jesus? How can the tree that God made, loved, cultivated, reject the master gardener and his son?

This morning, I want to look at the message in two parts, Israel's story, before ending with our response – Our story. So here we go. First part today;

Israel's Story

Follow along with me from Romans 9:1;

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit— ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. (Rom 9:1-4)

The apostle Paul, who wrote the book of Romans, was heartbroken that the nation that God had made, that he was a part of, the family tree that God had nurtured, from way back to father Abraham, had rejected his son Jesus Christ.

It broke his heart, because Paul was a Jew, and he understood the great history of his people with God. Listen to what he says about them in verse 4;

Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. (Rom 9:4-5)

The Jewish nation have this incredible rich spiritual history with God, but Paul is in anguish, because despite this, so many of them have rejected Jesus as the son of God.

This then raises the question, did God mess up? Did God's plan for Israel fail? Paul is going to answer this in verse 6;

It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." (Romans 9:6-7)

⁸ In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. (Romans 9:8)

Now this is interesting, because all three of the major world religions trace their history back to Abraham. Jews, Muslims and Christians, would all say, we're following the God of Abraham, but... and its a big but... Here is the difference for us as Christians, because we believe that the God of Abraham, is actually Jesus Christ! And they have rejected him.

So here is a helpful way to break it down. Abraham actually has three kinds of descendants, firstly;

Physical Descendants

These would be those who are physically descended from him. Some of them Jewish, some of them Muslim. Physical descendants. But secondly, Paul is also saying that Abraham has;

Spiritual Descendants

Like me. I am South African. My family descends from a British, Dutch, and German background. I'm not Jewish by descent, but I worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and his name is Jesus Christ! So I am a spiritual descendant of Abraham. And then thirdly, there are of course also those who are both;

Physical & Spiritual Descendants

Paul would be a good example of this. He is physically Jewish, but he also worships Jesus Christ as his God, so he is also a spiritual descendant.

Paul's heartache, is that his own people, represented by this amazing tree, who are descended from Abraham, who have their roots in the patriarchs, and who are responsible for so much of God's work on the earth, they are physically descended, but not spiritually descended.

And it is heartbreaking. The Old Testament and its history, is a huge part of our bibles. Most of the people in the Old Testament are Jewish. The Prophets, the Priests, the Kings, they're all Jewish. So many of our bible stories are all related to Jewish people!

At the beginning of the Early Church, the majority of the believers were still Jewish, but by the end of the first century, the majority were Gentiles. That's mostly us. The name 'Gentile' simply means anyone who was not from the tribe of Israel. And so a large number of Israelites rejected God. The tree that God had made, planted, blessed, nurtured, rejected its master.

While Israel had the privilege of knowing God first, not all of Israel choose to follow God. Just as God created us all with free will, the ability to follow Him or not, many of Israel chose not to follow God and to accept Jesus, and God has warned them about this, through the prophets, verse 27;

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. (Romans 9:27)

A remnant. What is a remnant? Throughout church history, in many biblical stories. There is always a remnant. A smaller group, within the bigger group, who remain committed to God. Like a small true flock within the big flock. You see this idea represented in many ways in scripture, wheat and weeds, sheep and goats, but God always knows who are truly his. He sees the heart. He knows the remnant who remain faithful to him.

So Paul is saying, that even though many from the nation of Israel have turned away from God, there is still a remnant who remain faithful to him. Some may feel that because of this, that God has turned his heart away from Israel, but that's not true. God still loves Israel. We don't believe in what is called

‘replacement theology,’ where Gentiles have replaced Israel. Rather, we believe that through Israel’s story, God has provided an opportunity for Gentiles also to be saved, and to be welcomed into God’s family. Verse 30;

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. (Romans 9:30-31)

³² Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. ³³ As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.” (Romans 9:32-33)

Paul comes back again and again to this idea, that Israel focused too much on the Law, thinking that it would save them, instead of focusing on faith. They were busy trying to earn their way to righteousness, something that they and we can never achieve.

So what is God and Paul’s heart for Israel? Look with me at chapter 10 vs 1;

Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ² For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. (Romans 10:1-2)

³ Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. ⁴ Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:3-4)

Paul longed for Israel to come back to God by accepting Christ. He was praying for them. We should be praying for them. The good news is that even though Israel has rejected God, God has not rejected Israel! Chapter 11 starts out like this;

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. ² God did not reject his people. (Romans 11:1-2)

Paul says, look at me. I am an Israelite and God saved me! He goes on;

Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. (Romans 11:11)

So here is what I want you to see, as you see this special and old tree here today, I want you to know that Israel's story is not yet finished. God has not rejected them. In fact, their rejection of God has served the wonderful purpose of opening the way for more people to come to salvation.

This was always God's plan, for salvation to be open to all, through Israel. They were meant to be a missionary nation, belonging to Israel was never the way to salvation, believing in God is.

But it is in many ways difficult to understand, it is one of life's many mysteries. Paul acknowledges this from verse 25;

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, ²⁶ and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. (Romans 11:25-26)

²⁷ And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." ²⁸ As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, ²⁹ for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. (Romans 11:27-29)

³⁰ Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. ³² For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (Romans 11:30-32)

Amen... So God is merciful, and will show mercy to anyone who turns to Him, whether Jew or Gentile.

So how do we view Israel now? I know for some, there is confusion about the status of Israel now in God's eyes. Has God rejected them and replaced them with the Church? I will be honest, I don't see that here in Romans.

On the other extreme, I see how some people in the early church taught that you had to join Israel to be saved! Get circumcised. Attend Synagogue. Today we also have some believers who think they have to become 'more Jewish' to be saved, but I don't see that here anywhere.

What I do see, is that God has a big picture plan, and that plan is to bring salvation to anyone who believes, not just to one nation. Amen?!!

But I also see that that Israel is not rejected, that God is not done with them, He still loves them and they are still special to them. They will not be saved by virtue of birth or descent though, they will only be saved when they come to faith in Jesus, same as everyone else.

Now I realise we may have some people listening to this message today thinking, why on earth are we talking about this? I live in Cape Town. What's Israel got to do with me?

Why should I care about Israel?

I get it. Most of us are Gentiles, we're not Jewish. This part of Romans is about Jewish people. Maybe you think this is the chapter of Romans that us Gentiles just need to skip? Right? Chapter 6, good. 7 good. 8 good. 9?10?11? Let's just skip these! These are about Israel.

I know it feels a bit like going to someone else's family reunion, and you're probably feeling; I don't know these people. I'm not related to them, why should they matter to me?

I get it, but think of it like this. If you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, you need to know, that by faith, this is our family. We worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we are followers of the same God that the people in The Old Testament, the Jewish, and the Hebrew people were anticipating the coming of, and His name is Jesus Christ.

I have never been to Israel, but obviously as a Christian Pastor, it's on my bucket list. But I have always had a great respect for them. If you think of all of the mighty nations and empires that have come against them in history, and yet all of them have come and gone, and Israel still stands. Their story is pretty much a David and Goliath story. Everyone is trying to take them down, but they are still there. I believe this is one of the evidences of God's kindness and affection toward them.

Winston Churchill said this; *The Jews are the most remarkable race. Some people like Jews & some do not, but no thoughtful man can doubt the fact that they are beyond all question the most formidable & the most remarkable race which has ever appeared in the world.*

Over 300 years ago, King Louis XIV France asked French philosopher Blaise Pascal to give him proof of the existence of miracles. "*Why, the Jews, your Majesty-the Jews.*"

Israels story is not yet done.

But secondly today, where do we fit in with all of this? What is our story? Paul assures us that it is not a matter of heritage, but a matter of faith. So let's look at;

Our Story

This is where we are going to come back to our Olive tree here. Because God is very creative, and He can take a dead branch anywhere, and graft it in. Paul says in Chapter 10:12;

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:12-13)

Next week Pastor Ian is going to come back and look at this section in Romans 10 to ask 'What is the Gospel?'

But we can be thankful, that God's good news is for everyone, no matter where you come from, who your ancestors are, what your skin colour is, your gender, your age, your social status - **Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved! Amen?!**

Here is the amazing thing for those of us who are not descended from Israel. Let me read through these last few verses from chapter 11, verse 12;

But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! ¹³ I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. (Romans 11:12-14)

¹⁵ For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. (Romans 11:15-16)

¹⁷ If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. (Romans 11:17-18)

¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you

stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. (Romans 11:19-21)

²² Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. (Romans 11:22-23)

²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (Romans 11:24)

Here is the incredible truth from these verses;

By faith you can be grafted into God's family tree!

I love this picture. Trees take a long time to grow. As I mentioned, this one is 50 years old. My friend has one that is 90 years old! I love this picture of how God's salvation story, has roots go all the way back to the garden of Eden – to Adam, then traced through others, to Abraham, Moses, David and then to Jesus through many generations.

(Take up branch)

And now, our story, is that if we are in Christ, we have been grafted in. That means that a wild branch, from another tree, can be carefully spliced to old tree, in such a way that they start to grow together.

Like agricultural adoption! All that history with God and Israel, is not scrapped, God has not rejected them, but rather the tree has been pruned, and some new branches have been grafted in!

Just like our time of cooking last week - I also don't know much about gardening. But as I prepared for this message this week. Here is what I do know. You get different kinds of olive tree's and branches.

Firstly, you get those that are wild.

And in many ways, they are worthless. They don't bear fruit. They're not very useful. In some ways, this was like us, the Gentiles, before we believed the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, we all start out wild. How many of you could share a testimony this morning of your wild days before Christ changed your life?! Right? So you have wild olive branches.

But secondly, you are have cultivated olive branches and olive trees.

To cultivate would mean there needed to be a master gardener, or Bonzai expert, who paid very careful attention to a plant and was really devoted. A tree like that could be fruitful for nearly 400 years, but it would require a lot of cultivation and pruning. They spot a branch that is bad. And, that's got to go. They cut it off. That's an infection. That's a dangerous bug. They cut it off. They tend to it carefully.

So here's the truth for some of us. To be a believer in Jesus Christ, is to be grafted in, and to be willing to be cultivated, and pruned. Many Christians, they like being grafted in, but they don't like being cultivated. They don't want to be pruned. But if your life is in the masters hands, the master knows what is best for you, and if he prunes you, it's not because he hates you, it's because he loves you, and he knows there are parts of your life that are still a bit wild.

This is what the Bible means by repentance. You change my mind and change your behaviour by the power of the Holy Spirit. Some things need to get cut out. Some relationships, some beliefs, some attitudes, some reactions, some actions, they need to get cut out. They literally need to get pruned away so that I could be more fruitful.

And then thirdly, there are those that are grafted in.

God started it all with Israel, the cultivated Olive tree, and then those of us who were the wild Gentiles, we were the wild branches, we were grafted in.

Just think about us it. We're all from different nations, different backgrounds, different families. Africans, Europeans, Brazilians, Chinese, even Australians! I don't really want to talk about the Australians today after yesterday's rugby. But God even loves them too! But here's the point, we all started in different places. But here we are in the church today, because we've been grafted in to the life of Jesus Christ. Amen?!

And the key to being fruitful as a Christian, is in abiding in that relationship. Jesus says, **"If you abide in me and I abide in you, you'll bear much fruit. But if you don't abide in me and I don't abide in you, you can't accomplish anything."**

So as I close today,

Conclusion

God has a big picture story – He has a plan – He knows exactly what He is doing. Anyone who believes in Jesus will be saved. What is your part of the story? Where do you fit on the family tree?

And let's get real - Are you grafted in, or are you broken off?

If you are grafted in, are you abiding in Jesus, and allowing him to prune you. If you are broken off - you are not in Christ. Not connected to the vine of life in Jesus.

And here's the challenge and the warning...

If God used Israel for generations, and then many of them stopped caring about God, and now God is using the Gentiles, we need to make sure that we don't fall into that same pattern of dishonour, disregard, disrespect and entitlement. Here's how he says it in Romans 11:21-24, "For if God did not spare the natural branches," those are the physical descendants of Abraham, "Neither will He spare you."

Friends, it's important that we learn to appreciate both the love, and the wrath of God. Kindness, and severity. God is merciful, and God is obligated to no one. In many ways, we live in a day, when there are a lot of people who think everyone should be forgiven, that everyone should go to heaven, that everyone should be loved, but God is obligated to no one. Anyone who receives salvation, receives it by the grace of God, not the obligation of God that provides that for them.

But God loves people, and he does not want anyone to perish. So be careful, lest you too be cut off.

Ask yourself, are you going to be part of the faithful remnant, or will you be part of those cut off?

Am I going to continue to love and serve God? Or will I just take God's blessings and benefits and reject the relationship that I need to have to be grafted into Him, and abide in Him, and allow Him to cultivate and prune you.

As one writer put it; You can be born into a Christian family, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ. You could be born into a Christian church, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ. You can attend a Christian school, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ. You can be baptised, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ. You can speak in tongues, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ. You can read books about Jesus, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ. You can study the Bible, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ. You can sing the worship songs, but you need to be grafted in to Jesus Christ.

I love and appreciate all of you. But it is important that you are grafted in. Do you know Jesus? Do you love Jesus? Do you follow Jesus? I want you to be cultivated. Are you growing and being pruned?

I will close with the words of Paul in chapter 11 verse 33;

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ³⁴ “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” ³⁵ “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” ³⁶ For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

Small Group Questions

1. Consider your family tree and background. What is your families story and how did you come to be ‘grafted in’ as a ‘wild olive shoot’ into the family of God?
2. If you feel comfortable to share with the group, what areas of your life is God wanting to ‘prune’ to grow you?
3. The bible speaks of the importance of ‘abiding in Christ’ and remaining connected to the vine. What are some of the ways you are doing this in your walk with God?