

The Olive Tree

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Date: 21 April 2019

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0:00] years, I've always had a pattern by which I stick to fairly rigorously in how to take our way through the Easter period in terms of services. This evening what I would like to do very much is to be able to come to the Word of God and show you God's plan of salvation, but not in a way that it's normally explained throughout the Gospels. It'll be explained here, but there's pictures that Paul uses in Romans, but it's simply so that you can go away from here this evening and know that God's plan of salvation has always been the same right from the very beginning. God's only ever had one plan, and he stuck to that plan, and the plan accomplished salvation, but the actual application and the implications of what I'm going to say this evening are far-reaching, and they're far-reaching for a couple of reasons. If you have children, and your children are grown up, and you wonder, well, where are they in relation to where the Lord is, and what about everything that

I taught them, and where are they now? This has direct impact on that type of situation. And for those who have young children and are going to bring them up in the church, again, this has direct impact on us. It may not become apparent immediately, but hopefully as we make our way through, we'll get to see that salvation, and I want to state this before I get into the readings and get into the message. Hear me very, very carefully. Salvation has always been by grace, through faith, and not of works. I'm going to say it again, just, okay? By grace, through faith, not of works, is how God says, okay? Please remember I said that, because I understand that in churches, people know that that's the right thing to say, but then are a little confused when they actually wonder what that looks like in real life. So Romans 9 is where I'm going to begin in verse 25, and I'm going to read to the end of verse 32, so just seven verses here. So Romans chapter 9, and beginning in verse 25. As indeed he says in Hosea, Isaiah, those who were not my people, I will call my people, and her who was not beloved, I will call beloved. And in the very place where it was said to them, you are not my people, there they will be called sons of the living God. And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, through the number of sons of Israel, be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay. And as Isaiah predicted, if the Lord of hosts had not left us an offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah. What shall we say then?

That the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is a righteousness that is by faith. But that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching the law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it was based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone. I'll read verse 33. As it is written, behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. If you'd like to turn to Romans 11, verse 11, I'll read just down to the end of 24. So Paul's continuing the argument and he says, so I ask you, did they stumble, that is the Jewish people who've just stumbled over Jesus, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means. Rather, through their trespass, salvation has come to the Gentiles so as to make Israel jealous. Now, if they're trespassed means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean? Now, I'm speaking to you Gentiles in as much then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles. I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the doe offered its first roots is holy, so is the whole lump. And if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among others, and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant towards the branches. If you are, remember, it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in. That is true. They were broken off because

of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Notes then, the kindness and the severity of God, severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in. For God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree? Well, may God bless the reading of his word, and I'm going to pray that God will bless us with understanding of it. There's a lot of olive tree going on. So before we get there, let's stand, let's sing, and then prepare our hearts for God's word.

[7 : 09] Let's pray. Father God, please, please enlighten our mind with a view of changing our heart.

Give us the grace to understand your word, and Father, cause us to depend entirely on your spirit, and that, Father, may we make every effort to come to your word. Father, may we receive it humbly, and may we bow before it as the supreme authority is Jesus Christ. Father, we ask this evening that you would speak to us, encourage us, bless us with your word, we pray, and remind us that we are sealed with the spirit until the day of redemption. As we have sung, that since we now belong to you, we can never be anything else but one of your children. And for this, we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Salvation is something that we're all used to, but I want to sort of take you back and remind you that salvation is utterly surprising. And one of the reasons why salvation is surprising is because it comes to you as a gift, and you're not entirely sure, I'm not even sure if I was looking for it, or even if I was looking for it, I feel the surprise, I feel the awe, I feel the wonder when this gift turns up. John Wesley said himself, how can it be that I should gain an interest in my Saviour's blood? How can it be? Just how can this be that I should gain an interest in my Saviour's blood? Why is it that all of a sudden I am interested in the fact that this man, Jesus Christ, died for me?

Why is it that I'm interested all of a sudden that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead? And that fills my heart with wonder and with joy. I guess what I want to do this evening is just begin and remind you that salvation is surprising. It should fill you with awe, it should fill you with wonder.

And, you know, we're not to forget how God saves, but we're not to forget why God saves, we're not to forget any of it really. But the trouble is we can forget it. It's easy for the awe and the wonder of salvation to easily slip through our minds. Our minds are like SIS even when it comes to the very precious things of God. But God has saved you by grace through faith. It is a gift from him to you. And I guess, if anything, the church calendar, being able to have an Easter period, Good Friday, Easter Sunday. And I know that something terrible has happened in the world this Easter Sunday. But we're not to forget that the calendar itself takes our mind back and gives us a good shake to remind us again exactly what it is that Christ has done.

[10 : 28] To remind us again that what can you now do to a man who has risen from the dead? Nothing. Christ rules the world and all authority belongs to him. And we follow him. We follow Christ who cannot be defeated. We follow Christ who has defeated death. And here we are enjoying the salvation and knowing what that salvation looks like. It looks like a resurrected life. Okay, so we don't even have to fear a death that one day will happen to us if the Lord doesn't return before then. But the point is, is that as we look at Christ, we see the accomplishment and we see that everything that he has given us. We see what he has done. The beauty here in Romans 9 and Romans 11 or 9 through to 11 that we have read in our readings is really the beauty of salvation but from a different camera angle.

We normally hear the story of salvation through the promises of Christ in the Old Testament and then we hear how those promises are fulfilled in Christ in the New Testament. But what we have here is God's plan of salvation explained as an olive tree and branches. Branches being grafted in that were not naturally part of the olive tree and natural branches that were in the olive tree that have been cut away due to their unbelief. What we have here is a story that God's plan of salvation was accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross but it began a very long time ago. And Israel lives with this confusion and the confusion is, has God changed his mind? Here we are living this way in the way that God wants us to and now we find ourselves in a position where it doesn't appear that we're right with God. Israel are confused and this is something that Paul has to point out to them about how a person becomes right with God. Well, Paul is saying it's the same way that

they've only ever become right with God. Abraham was declared righteous because he had faith in the promise of God.

That is the only way a person can become right with God. Abraham was the first Jew. Abraham was Abraham even before the Jewish nation existed. It began with him. And he, as we read back in Romans earlier, through his faith in the promises of God, he is declared righteous. So Paul has made a clear argument that even before you get to the Lord Jesus Christ, it has always been about faith.

It has always been about faith in the promises of God. What's happened is that the nation of Israel think that God has now changed his plan. Because they didn't understand it was about faith, they thought it was works-based. Salvation is about you becoming right with God. Salvation is about how God makes you right with him. Salvation is about you having the right standing with God this very evening, where no accusation can be laid against your life at all. When you stand with God this evening or sit with God as you are, there is nothing that can come against you from the evil one. There's nothing that can come against you from anyone in this world concerning your standing with God. You are right with God through grace, through faith. And this has been given to you. Now, that seems fairly simple, right?

Why does that need any little introduction before we get to it like I gave you this evening? Well, because as we move on to this olive tree, it may be a picture that you're not so familiar with.

[14:29] We're familiar with everything else, but then this, what is this olive tree? What are the branches? What are the natural branches and the wild branches? And what is that going to do with belonging in, how does all this fit together? Well, let me summarize for you. Paul is addressing confusion.

And it's, the confusion is quite a common one. They have taken the promises of God, and they've decided to do something else with them other than by believe them by faith. Abraham led the way. Abraham says, Abraham's righteousness is declared to him because he believed them by faith, he lived by faith. And right, let's just follow his example. But over time, what began to happen is that God's people decided to turn God's law into something that they would then try and accomplish to get a righteousness all by themselves. As if to say, I can get this another way. I can become, I can get a right standing before God by living in a way that God wants me to. And the trouble is, they've tried to do it, and they've not arrived at the place where they have a right standing before God. Jesus has to point out to them, you brood of vipers. Well, these are people who have a zeal for God. But their zeal is without understanding, as Paul says in Romans 10 verses 1 through to 4. The trouble is, is they've tried to get right with God on their own standing. And by getting right with God on your own standing, you can't help but then reject the righteousness of Christ. If I think I can be right with God without Jesus, then I'm going to be trying, I'm going to try and be right without Jesus. And the moment I'm told I need Jesus, what do I need Jesus for? I'm getting there all by myself. And Paul says, you will never get there all by yourself. The only way you can get there is through Christ. It is through faith. Now, they have misunderstood and they have misapplied what God has taught. And they have turned all the privileges that they have into things to accomplish through their own efforts without depending on God, without exercising that in faith, thinking that they are just about across the finish line where they're right with God, only to then be told by Paul, you're no further ahead now than when you begun. And I told you about a lady once who was on her deathbed and her son was a vicar. And her son said to her, like, now is really the time to repent and believe. It's not as if I haven't told you before. And you'll remember her response. It's literally shattering. And she says, for me to repent and believe now would be for me to admit that I have lived my whole life for the wrong reason. And I'm just not willing to do that.

Okay? People who do it wrong for a very long time and then told at the end of that long time that they've got it wrong, sometimes cannot bring themselves to admit that they've got it wrong.

Okay? It's just too painful. And this is where these God's people, Israel, are. But we've been doing this for years, they say to Paul. How can this be so? Well, you can do something for a very, very long time and it be wrong. I can remember one of my bosses pulling me up when I worked for Lewis's back in the day when I was a roofer. And I had put 67 ridge tiles on this ridge line. It was a fairly big ridge line. And the aim, of course, over 67 is to get it straight. Now you might think, well, it's on a roof. Who's going to notice? Right? I noticed. And so I remember being there until I called it past eight in the evening. And my boss, in the afternoon the following day, phoned me up because I was on a different building site at that time. And he says, Dan, can you come back to the office

today? This is a better job that you had done. So he called me into the office and I thought, I don't think I've done anything wrong. I wasn't driving too fast. What could it be?

[18 : 51] And he says, it's about the ridge line you finished last night. I said, yeah, I know I stayed too late, but managed to get the job done and moved on with a different one this morning. And he says, you put 67 ridge tiles down. I said, but they are straight. He says, I know they're straight.

I've looked at them, but they're all the wrong color. So it didn't occur to me to look around at the other houses to think, right? And what do you do?

Right? And sometimes it's just hard to admit, right? You've done all this work. How can it be wrong? Well, it can be wrong sometimes in the most simplest of ways. As one person pointed out, many people try to get right with God by climbing the ladder only to find when they get to the top that it's leaning against the wrong building. Okay? They get it wrong in the most simplest of ways.

The way you get right with God is through Jesus and only through Jesus. And the people of God wouldn't appreciate that. That they don't like the fact that righteousness comes through Christ.

They thought it came through their own. So here they are trying to get ahead. Here they are trying to be as good as they can. And now they're accusing God of having two plans, not one.

[20 : 10] Right? This is the way you get right with God. And God seems to have forgotten that way and just moved on to the Gentiles and Jesus. Paul said, God hasn't moved on to the Gentiles and Jesus.

Jesus was always the central part of his plan. Jesus was always the person that we were to repent and believe in and have faith in. God is the person that we exercise faith in. And Paul points out in Romans 10 that the people that he's speaking to have a real zeal for God. They love God.

They pray better than we do. But they have no understanding. And he desires that they be saved.

And, but their adamance to remain as they are in pursuing their own works of righteousness means that they are then rejecting the righteousness of Christ. You can have a righteousness either given to you by Christ through his life, death, and resurrection, or you can try and achieve your own that will never, ever come. The point here, Paul is saying, is God hasn't had two plans.

Where he began with Israel and then Israel, he just, he just couldn't do anything with them. And so he moved on to the Gentiles and Jesus and suddenly everyone's getting saved.

Now, God's plan of salvation has always been about grace through faith. It's always been about that. It just so happens that the natural branches didn't get it. And so God grafted in these wild olive branches into the olive branches into the olive tree. Okay. God hasn't had two plans.

[21 : 54] It's just that as his plan unfolds throughout history, the key distinction is those who belong by faith and those who tried to belong by doing good works. So then the olive tree itself, this is quite a powerful image. And I want you to realize that God only has one people.

And though there are two different types of branches or mainly natural branches and wild branches, there is only one tree. There's only one place where both these branches belong. Okay.

Where they belong. And you'll notice that there's two ways of being in the olive tree. You can either be a natural branch, means that you're in there naturally, or you can be a wild branch that has been grafted into by grace through faith. You know, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gentiles have been grafted in to the olive tree. God hasn't changed his plan. This has always been part of God's plan.

But some of the natural branches have been cut away. They were in the tree, but they have been cut away. And just in case you're thinking, have they lost their salvation? Well, Paul's point is, is that they were never saved in the first place. Right? Because they persisted in works of the law. They were never right with God through faith. They were trying to get right with God through the works of the law. But they were in the tree by virtue of being in Israel, by being children of the promise, by being brought up under the law and the blessings of God. And so they are cut away due to their unbelief. And because they are then cut away, God grasps in Gentile believers. So as to make Israel jealous. Okay. So Israel were sat there scratching their head thinking, we've lived our whole life for you. We've, we've, we've obeyed every single one of your laws, like the rich young ruler. You know, God says quite clearly, no one's good but God alone. Okay. And the man says, well, what do I do need to, what do I need to do to get eternal life? Jesus mentions a few commandments. And the young man says, I've kept them all.

Even though Jesus has just said, no one's good by God, but God alone. He said, well, I am. Right? And that's Israel's problem. That's Israel's problem. They are being, being called, called to jealousy now because Gentiles who haven't obeyed a single law of God in their life are now right with God

by grace through faith without obeying a single law. They've just been grafted in. And right. And God uses jealousy to cause his people to say, has God changed his mind? No. It's because it's always been about grace through faith. It's always been about grace through faith. It's just that the promise was to you first.

[25 : 03] This is why Paul begins his letter to Romans to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, because the promise was always to God's people as a demonstration of what God was going to do with the world.

The trouble is they just didn't get it. And so the warnings that follow are the same for both sets of branches. Hebrews 11 verse 21. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Now, this is where we begin to struggle. But this is where we really shouldn't struggle.

The struggling point here is that we obviously see that there is one tree. And we obviously see that there are natural branches. And then there are new branches grafted in, wild branches grafted in. We've got no problem with how the wild branches are grafted in, right? Because we know that they're grafted into the olive tree by grace through faith. But some of us might be scratching our head this evening and saying, well, how did the natural ones get there? Right? Fair question. How did they get there? And the answer is in exactly the same way. In exactly the same way. God's story of salvation begins with the people. And those people are to understand that the way that you belong to God is by grace through faith. And if you don't live by grace through faith, then you're cut away from God.

So whether you're a natural branch or not, okay, the means by being right with God is by grace through faith. Or you're cut away. If you continue in your unbelief, if you don't continue in the kindness of God, you are removed. We are being reminded time and time again that God saves by grace through faith.

[26 : 58] Again, chapter 11, verse 22. Note then that the kindness and the severity of God. Severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness.

Otherwise, you too will be cut off. There is a type of living which, if persisted in, will only demonstrate to you that you never truly belonged in the first place. And that's the warning. And that warning is both an Old Testament warning and a New Testament warning. And the warning is this, that you cannot get right with God through doing it yourself. You can only be right with God through faith. You can only be right with God through faith. God has one plan. There is only one tree.

There are two sets of branches. There are the natural branches which remain in the tree by faith. And there are the wild branches which are grafted into the tree by faith. And those, whoever they are, who don't, who continue in their unbelief are cut away. Because the only way to be in is by faith.

And this is why God points out that they were cut off because of their unbelief, because they persisted in their unbelief. So the warnings and the promises are fairly straightforward. That the things that apply to God's people of old apply to the people even today. How do I know that I am right with God?

Well, I only know through faith. That's the only way I can know. I cannot know through my prayer life. I cannot know through keeping God's commandments. I cannot know that. I am to pray. I am to read his word. I am to receive the blessing and benefits of all of that. But I'm only right with God through faith. Now, why is this a challenge? Well, it's a hard message for those who like to have a salvation formula. Okay? And too often, gospel messages come across in a salvation formula.

[29 : 16] I say this, you believe that, bang, you're saved. Okay? Isn't that how it goes? It's normally a very cut and dry salvation formula that people like to come up with. And yet, what we have here is a story that doesn't fit that neat formula. We don't have a simple repent and believe and you're saved.

We have natural branches that are cut away and we have wild branches that are grafted in. The idea of it simply being a simple in-out is now a problem for people who want a simple salvation formula because that's not how the story unfolds. So, this is what we are to notice. Paul is saying this, that the promises of the Old Testament and the warnings of the Old Testament apply to New Testament Christians because God has only ever had one plan. The plan of salvation is that people are right with God only by faith. People have only ever been right with God by faith. Abraham was right with God by faith.

Christians are to live in the light that they are right with God by faith. And they are to understand that people who do not live by faith, who are unbelievers, don't remain in the faith. They are cut away. They disappear wherever they may be. Not all Israel are Israel, Paul says. And this is confusing for people who want a simple in-out, right? Because you're all asking the question, how did the natural branches who are cut away get in there in the first place, right? If you're reading this carefully, that's one of the conundrums that you're left with. How did they get in and then get cut away? How did they even get in in the first place if they continued in unbelief? The point that Paul is making is the same point that Jesus makes a little bit later on. The cross of Christ is what brings these wild olive branches into the olive tree. And they're not to get ahead of themselves. Gentile believers like me, like you, we're not to get big-headed to think we're in and Israel who were given all the promises of God haven't made it. Because we would then be making the same mistake that Israel was making, thinking we must have done something to get in. We must have got something right when they got something wrong. No, we're in by grace through faith, and they're in by grace through faith, and whoever persists in unbelief isn't in. Okay? Because the only way to please God is through faith. We are not to forget the warning. We are to continue in the kindness of God. And so the importance here is to understand both the promises that lead to Christ and the warnings. The warning here applies, you'll notice, to the wild olive shoots, which are the Gentile believers that have been grafted in to the olive tree. Well, here's the exhortation then as we sort of wrap it up. Number one, no Christian is meant to live their life by means of the flesh without the necessity of faith. We are not to try and live in such a way where we can please God or live as we want to please without exercising faith in any way whatsoever. But neither are we to live a life of passive resignation. Will we just sit back and say, well, whatever God wills will be without the choice to obey? Paul is telling us that God takes into consideration your choice to obey in your Christian life. He takes that into consideration.

That is part of his plan. It is true that God will do whatever he wants to do. But what Paul is saying here is that God does whatever he wills to do, but he takes into consideration your choice to obey or to persist in unbelief. The other thing here, at least as an important lesson, is what this means for you. You're a Gentile believer who has been grafted in to the olive tree. This is who you are in Romans 11.

You're not a natural branch, okay? But it just so happens to be that there are some natural branches amongst us. Well, who are they? They're not Jews. Well, you've got to understand how a natural branch becomes a natural branch. And that is that we recognize immediately in old that Abraham's children were the branches of the branches of the branches. We're told in Psalms that the children of a woman, a mother, are her olive shoots, are her olive branches. And God is using a picture that his people would have understood, that children of believing parents are natural branches. They are in, but the way that they remain in is by grace through faith. And if children persist in unbelief, which does happen in Christian families, they're cut away. But we want to say, no, you have to get your way in. But that's not what we see here. What we see here is natural branches that are already in and who then persist in unbelief. And yet too often in the New Testament church, we want to flatten it all out to say, no, you're out until you prove that you're in. But here in covenant theology, in the way that God plans it out, is that God has a purpose for bringing children of believing parents up in the faith. And they are to continue repenting and believing and understanding that all that they receive is by grace through faith. But if they persist in unbelief, if they don't repent, then they're cut away. Well, you're going to say, well, that's a little bit unfair using an Old Testament example to prove a New Testament point about families in the church. Well, let me quote Jesus then in John 15.

[35 : 37] Jesus put it this way, every branch in me which bears fruit is pruned so that it produces more fruit to the glory of God. Okay? Every branch in me, in me, is pruned to produce more fruit so that it brings glory to God. But then Jesus also says this, but any branch in me, any branch in me that does not bear fruit is cut away and burned. Okay? It's cut away and burned. Well, can you lose your salvation or not?

No. But what Jesus is pointing out is the same thing that Paul is pointing out here in Romans, that in God's plan of salvation history, there's a way of belonging, okay, in order to produce fruit. And if you don't produce fruit, you're cut away. How do you produce fruit? By grace through faith. Okay? This is why I made the point at the beginning that all of this is about grace through faith, but it may not be a salvation story that you're used to. So Jesus in John 15, Paul here in Romans 11,

and pictures in the Old Testament clearly indicate that there's a way of belonging in order to produce fruit, the fruit of faith, just like Abraham. But if you continue in unbelief, you are cut away. Hence why the warnings of the Old Testament are the warnings of the New Testament. Jesus is using an image that God's people of the day would have understood, and he's using an image that we have to come to understand. Let me finish with this as a final thought. Salvation is not a human achievement.

And salvation has always been about God's grace through faith. Jesus is the only one who can accomplish salvation. And that's the point of the olive tree. That's the point of the olive tree. There is one olive tree, but there are different branches. There are natural branches that are already there by the grace of growing up in a Christian family, by the grace of growing up under the head of Abraham, who are there receiving all the blessings of God, receiving all the commandments, receiving all the Passover and everything like this, in order to have faith in that. But if they persist in unbelief, they're cut away. Because the only way we know if we belong is if we belong by grace through faith. And then there are those who have grown up and who have never read the Bible, who never had a mother or father to teach it to them, who were never sent to Sunday school, and all of a sudden, somebody mentions it to them, and they turn up in church one day and hear God speak to them through their word, and there they are, the wild olive branch brought in to the olive tree that's always been there.

[38 : 36] Why? Because God's only ever had one plan and one way of making people right with him. And that is by grace through faith. And so there's a message here, a very simple message, that God has never had a plan B because God has never needed to have a plan B. The way people are right with him is the way that people have only ever been right with him, and that is by leaving the promises of God. And to them, it is a credit to them righteousness, just like Abraham. Amen.