

ROMANS XLIV: WARNING TO ROME

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INTRODUCTION:

When we fall into the trap of thinking of the Bible as a book to aid us in our personal devotions, we often miss the larger context. We need to remember that this is a letter to a particular church in a particular city, and Paul gave the warning because he saw certain kinds of arrogance developing.

THE TEXT:

“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. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off” (Rom. 11:17-22).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Those Jews who had not believed in their Messiah had been broken off from the olive tree—the tree of covenant continuity (v. 17). But Gentiles, wild olive branches, were grafted in (v. 17). The newcomers are exhorted by Paul not to boast about it—they don’t support the root (v. 18). There is an answer to this—weren’t they cut out to make room for us (v. 19)? Paul says that may well be, but they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Paul says that highmindedness is out, and fear should be there instead (v. 20). If God did not spare natural branches, why on earth would He spare grafted in, wild olive branches (v. 21)? There are two attributes of God that must be kept in mind—severity for apostates and goodness for those who stand by faith (v. 22).

OLIVE TREE IMAGERY:

The image of Israel as an olive tree is a common one in the Old Testament (e.g. Hos. 14:5-7). The root is obviously the grace of God found in Christ (John 15: 1-7), but the ancient manifestation of this root grace was found in Abraham (Gal. 3:29). The Jews had been cultivated for so long that they were considered the natural branches on this tree, and the Gentiles were the wild branches. Normally, the grafting practice was to graft a cultivated branch onto a wild root, but Paul reverses this. Here the blessing comes on the Gentile branches who were privileged to be joined to the ancient covenant promises.

Notice in this image that we find a biblical illustration that ties everything together in one unified covenant throughout the Scriptures. The apostle does not call the Jews an olive tree, and then say that with the Gentiles we have a newly planted peach tree. No, it is all one tree, with one glorious story. This illustration, by itself, overthrows many common ways of understanding the relationship of the Church to Israel. But in this analogy, the Church is the renewed Israel.

WORDS OF WARNING:

This is not a letter written to generic Gentiles. These words are given to the saints in Rome. “To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7). When he cautions them against hubris, why would he do this? He did it because he saw the first stirrings of it. Remember that Paul characteristically argues “one of you will say then,” and he does this because he knows how the Q&A sessions usually go. And what happens here? “God cut out the Jews to make way for us Romans” (v. 19). Remember that this was the capital city of the most powerful empire in the world. Anyone who thinks that Christians don’t get caught up by this kind of reflected glory need to ask more pointed questions of their sinful hearts. The Lord spurned the devil’s offer of all the kingdoms of men in their glory—His followers have not always been so successful.

THE PROBLEM:

Classical Protestants, following Paul's teaching in Romans 8 have long held that nothing can separate the elect from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8: 33). We hold to the final and complete perseverance of the elect because God will not fail to complete what He has begun (Rom. 8: 38-39). In contrast, the Church at Rome has ignored and set aside the letter that Paul wrote to them, not only on the question of faith alone, but also on the question of whether their church can fall away. The Roman church teaches that the salvation of no one is secure in this life—three popes in a row, and ten cardinals in succession, if they commit mortal sin, could all die and be condemned eternally. But they also teach that their church is incapable of falling away, that it is “unfailingly holy,” to use the words of their catechism. Paul reverses this, and so must we. Any church can fall away (Rev. 2:5), and the elect of God cannot fall away (John 10:29).

TAKE HEED:

We must face up to our constant temptation to draw contrasts between our position as Christians and the Jews' position in the Old Testament. The New Testament consistently draws parallels, and we (for the sake of our traditions) want to draw these contrasts. But the way Israel fell into sin is set before us regularly (1 Cor. 10: 1-11; Heb. 3: 7ff; 4: 11; Rom. 11:17ff), and we are consistently warned against doing the very same thing. This means that the fact that Rome received this letter two thousand years ago does not make the warning less relevant, but rather far more relevant. How long before Paul wrote these words had the Jews been called through Abraham? Two thousand years—that is what created the temptation for them. And we should take care as well. Eventually the Westminster Confession will be two thousand years old.



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