



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Romans 11:16-24

“The Gentiles Warned”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The general theme of this series of messages is The Apostle Paul and the Purpose of the Ages, or to put it in popular terms, What is God Doing Now? This, the fourth in our series of seven messages, is entitled "The Gentiles Warned." Have your Bibles before you as we study together and turn them to Romans 11, verse 16 through verse 24. And I think you'll profit a great deal more from the message if you look at the text as we go along.

Temple University's Paul van Buren has said Christians should thank God that the Jews have said, "No," to the church and faith in Christ, for "if there were no more Jewish people, we would have lost the most enduring sign of God's faithfulness." Van Buren's views are far from Paul's, as one in looking at Romans 9:3 and chapter 10 verse 1 might see. But in one respect he has highlighted a genuine point. The remnant of Israel in the church, brought to grace by the Holy Spirit, is an enduring proof God has not cast away His people.

Paul has made a startling point in verses 11 through 15. The fall of the mass of Israel will result in their ultimate blessing through Gentile salvation. Worldwide blessing is the final end of the divine purpose, or such a thing as "life from the dead", verse 15.

On what basis can we hope for Israel's return? Paul turns to that question in verses 16 through 24. The promises made to Abraham centuries ago are the key, promises centering finally in Christ, the Divine Seed of the patriarch. He will demonstrate his point by an illustration, the figure of the olive tree in verse 16 through verse 24.

Edith Schaeffer has written a book with the intriguing title, *Christianity Is Jewish*. And Paul Achtemeier in a recent commentary on Romans has said that if we wish to share in God's blessing for all peoples, then we are going to have to get it through Abraham or we will not get it at all. Paul, as we shall see, will endorse these views.

He will also show that, although there is a legitimate distinction between Israel and the church, those who speak of the two entities as having separate new covenants, separate promises, and separate destinies have missed the continuity of the divine purpose in the one people of God.

Let's look now at verse 16 where the apostle sets forth the fundamental principle of history, and first, the figure of the firstfruits and the lump. In our last study we pointed out that verse 16 gives the reason for the expectation of Jewish restoration to divine favor. Under two figures, that of the first-fruits and the lump and the root and the branches, the apostle contends that the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant promises belong to Israel, God's elect nation.

The figure of the firstfruits and the lump, derived from the Old Testament, represent Abraham, the patriarchs, and then, their descendants. The figure of the root and the branches refers to the same entities. Paul's point is clear: The election of Abraham and the patriarchs makes them and their descendants the natural branches, holy in the sense of consecrated to God's purposes. God's sovereign good pleasure in giving them His covenant is the basis of the hope of their restoration. Individuals, of course, share in the covenant only if they believe in the patriarch's Redeemer and Messiah, the Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul makes that point quite clearly in Romans chapter 4,

verse 11 and 12, and Romans chapter 9, verse 6 through verse 8 where he plainly says that the chosen in Israel are those who believe in the redeemer.

Secondly, an admonitory perspective on history, verses 17 through verse 22 of Romans chapter 11. And in verse 17 and 18, Paul speaks warning against boasting over God's covenantal love. To clarify and expound more fully his point, Paul uses the second figure of verse 16, that of the root and branches, since it permits a distinction to be made between branches, collectively or individually, between believers and unbelievers, between Jews and Gentiles. In the exposition that follows there is a warning to Gentiles in verses 17 through 22 and a fresh argument for Jewish restoration in verses 23 and verse 24, suggestive of the statements he made in verses 11 and verse 15.

The figure of the olive tree represents the Abrahamic Covenant in its origin, development, and fulfillment at the end of the Times of the Gentiles in the Advent of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. It will, therefore, be helpful to recall the nature, the terms, and the sacrifice of the covenant, so beautifully described in Genesis 12, verse 1 through verse 3 and in Genesis 15, verse 7 through verse 21.

In Genesis 12:1 through 3, and it might help to turn to that passage as you listen, Moses describes the promises of the covenant in personal, national, and universal terms. There were personal promises to Abraham, guaranteeing him a great name (notice verse 2). There has been a remarkable fulfillment of this promise, for Abraham's name is great in the three influential religions of the world: Judaism, Islam, Christianity.

Abraham was also given national promises. He was promised a land and a believing ethnic seed through whom Abraham would become the root and centre of the future history of the world. The great promise of the Redeemer in Genesis 3:15 receives here further delineation and expansion, and the New Testament will identify the seed as the Lord Jesus Christ in Galatians 3:16.

And, finally, Abraham was given universal promises. His seed through Christ will encompass Gentiles as well, in fact, in Moses' words, “all the families of the earth.” Christ is, of course, the “in the,” in whom all the families of the earth are blessed.

The ratification of the covenantal promises is described by Moses in Genesis 15, verse 7 through 21. It is a most striking event, pointing unmistakably to the unilateral nature of the covenant. Three features stand out, but we'll emphasize the third. First, the delay and the discipline of it in verse 11 and 12, suggestive of delay in God's fulfillment of the conditions and of a consummation of the covenant in the teeth of opposition.

And second, the terror and great darkness mentioned in verse 12, perhaps the product of a nightmare, and adding a sense of gloom to the scene suggestive, some think, of Messiah's death, the true Servant of the Lord. Only through Him is there any deliverance, and then necessarily by judgment. And third, the theophany, that's surely the most important of these features, and it provides Abraham with a symbol of the glory of God for the first time since the Garden of Eden.

The darkness made the phenomena that much more distinct by the contrast. The “smoking oven” was a cylindrical firepot, such as was used in the house of the Eastern people. A brilliant flame, something like a fiery torch, streamed forth from the furnace. We may assume that the pieces of dead animals represented the seed of Abraham, utterly impotent in themselves, but nevertheless the objects of the divine purposes of life and blessing through the Mediator's sufferings. They were, of course, utterly impotent in themselves as a result of the fall in the Garden of Eden, true of all men since the day of that fall.

The covenantal promise is given in verses 18 through 21, and there is total confusion in the events of Genesis 15 if we do not understand this. Yahweh is ratifying a covenant, the visible features being symbolical of the spiritual. The ancient ceremony used by the Lord here was one to which allusion may be made in Jeremiah chapter 34, verse 18 through verse 20, where the prophet speaks of the ratification of a covenant by

cutting a calf in two and passing between its parts. Notice particularly Jeremiah 34 and verse 18.

And in history outside of the Scriptures, there is an interesting example of the same custom. Immediately after the death of Alexander the Great, a dispute concerning succession to him arose. The horseguards and the rest of the cavalry under Perdiccas made up one party, while the infantry under Meleager made up the other. The dispute and strife became so fierce that it seemed that only warfare could possibly settle the matter. Finally a compromise was agreed upon, and a dog was cut in two, with the whole army passing between the pieces in vivid picture of its reunion.

The custom has also left its mark upon the Hebrew, Greek, and Mari languages. In Hebrew the phrase signifying the making of a covenant is to cut a covenant, while in Greek it is literally to cut oaths. In Mari the expression, “to slay an ass,” was idiomatic for entering into a compact.

The most important feature of Moses’ account in Genesis fifteen is the peculiar action of God. In other covenants both parties walk between the pieces of the animals. In this instance, however, God symbolically walks between the pieces, and Abraham is not invited to follow. How important that is! Please notice it carefully as you look at the text. The meaning is clear: This covenant is not a conditional covenant in which certain duties must be fulfilled by man. It is one in which God undertakes to fulfill the conditions Himself, thus guaranteeing by the divine fidelity to His Word and by His power the accomplishment of the covenantal promises.

The fact that God alone passed between the pieces of the animals meant that God was binding only Himself to give to Abraham and His seed the promises He had made to him. One striking thing about this is that both liberal and orthodox commentators have seen this. It's not often that one can find the two viewpoints uniting in interpretation, but here they do. For example, the German liberal commentator, Grehard von Rad notes, “The ceremony proceeded completely without words and with the complete passivity of

the human partner.” On the other hand, Herman Ridderbos, an orthodox Dutch commentator, writes, “Abraham is deliberately excluded, he is the astonished spectator.” That's, I think, a marvelous statement.

To sum up, then, the Abrahamic Covenant is an unconditional covenant, depending for its fulfillment entirely upon God's fidelity to His Word. The absence of any stated conditions in the context confirms this. What a marvelous comfort that brings to believers, for we enjoy our forgiveness of sins ultimately through the promises of the covenants of God.

Paul's figure is a parable from horticulture, but it is governed by grace. Notice the 24th verse of chapter 11 of Romans. In nature itself it is the practice to graft a cultivated scion on a wild stock.

The warning to the Gentile believers begins in verse 17 with the conjunctive particle, “Now”. The “some” in the context refers to the mass of the nation. The process described is unnatural horticulturally, and that is the point that Paul wishes to stress. He says, "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."

There are two very important expressions in the verse, which have significant bearing on the relation of the covenantal promises to Israel and the church. The expressions are the prepositional phrase, “among them,” “grafted in among them,” and the words, “with them partakest” or literally a fellow partaker. The expressions make it very plain that Paul believes that the Gentiles in the church share in the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant with Israel, although, as he makes very plain, they remain Gentiles.

This passage makes it very difficult to maintain, as some attempt to do, that there are separate promises and destinies for Israel and the church of Jesus Christ. In fact, this text is the Achilles heel of the view that there is extreme discontinuity between Israel and the church. It suggests one body of Messianic promises for one people of God composed of two separate and distinct national origins.

In verse 18 the apostle warns the Gentiles, for he is addressing them, against boasting over the branches that have been broken off, that is, the mass of Israel. He reminds them, the Gentile believers, that they are not self-sustaining. It is the root, the Abrahamic covenantal promises, that bears them. Incidentally, the text is a strong warning against any form of Christian anti-Semitism, something not unknown in history, as we all know very clearly and plainly and certainly.

Then in verse 19 through verse 22, the apostle warns against pride of electing grace. In a kind of diatribe-like reply, the Gentile is described by the apostle as replying, “Branches were broken off that I (that I is emphatic in the original text) might be grafted in.” To which Paul replies, “That is true” (or “well” literally), for he is thinking of the ultimate purpose of Gentile salvation, which we looked at in verses 11 through 15. He reminds his Gentile readers, however, that the Jews have fallen by reason of unbelief, and that they, the Gentiles, stand simply upon the ground of faith. And he again warns them against arrogance and pride, for faith is not self-originated, but the gift of a gracious God, as the apostle makes plain in so many passages of the New Testament such as Philippians 1:29, 1 Corinthians 4:7 and chapter 12 in verse 3, and Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9.

In verse 21 Paul gives the reason why they, the Gentiles, should not presume upon their spiritual election. If He has not spared the natural branches, God surely will not fail to judge the unnatural branches. We see here one of the answers to the common question of those who find the doctrines of election and perseverance unpleasant. “Are there not many passages that warn of failure?” they say. That is true. The children of God are warned against falling away as one of the means of preventing falling away. And the professing believer who has no godly fear and presumes upon his election in pride is in danger of failure. Thus, the promise of the Word of God is, “I will put my fear in their hearts, in order that they may not depart from me,” Jeremiah 32:40.

Verse 22 is a deduction from the preceding discussion. Upon the generation that rejected the Messiah has come the severity of God in divine judgment, but upon the

believing Gentiles His goodness. Paul, however, cannot continue without a final admonition. It is goodness for them, if they continue in His goodness. Otherwise they expose themselves to a cutting off from the tree, a very salutary warning to Gentile believers.

It should, of course, be obvious from the chapter that Paul has in mind the Jews and Gentiles collectively. He is not seeking to suggest to individual believers that they are unjustified in possessing assurance of salvation. One only has to look at the many passages in Paul to see quite plainly that he believed most strongly in assurance of salvation and of assurance of eternal salvation. Take a look at 2 Timothy 1:12, for example, or Romans chapter 8.

At the same time, John Murray is right in saying, "The conditional clause in this verse, 'if thou continue in his goodness,' is a reminder that there is no security in the bond of the gospel apart from perseverance. There is no such thing as continuance in the favor of God in spite of apostasy; God's saving embrace and endurance are correlative." The reason for that is quite simple, because it's the grace of God that saves, and it's the grace of God that keeps us in our salvation. And just as surely as he saves us, he keeps the saints in his marvelous salvation.

We turn now to the last two verses of our section where the apostle speaks of the proviso and the probability of Israel's restoration. First, the proviso, verse 23, the apostle writes, "And they also, if they continue not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again."

The argument for Israel's restoration, based on the figure of the olive tree, begins here. Their rejection is not final. In fact, according to Paul the only thing hindering their entrance into the covenantal blessing is their present unbelief. "And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief," he says, "shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again." Of course, we are speaking of things from the human standpoint. On the divine plane of things there is the purpose of God to consider, and to the moment it has been



His purpose to keep the door open for Gentiles in their full number to enter in. The adverb, “again,” should be noted, referring to the national reintroduction into blessing. One thinks of passages like Matthew chapter 21 and verse 43, and Acts 3:19 through 21. He cannot only restore Israel if they believe, He can remove their unbelief itself. He is able to graft them in again.

Verse 24, Paul's final word in the section that we are studying, shows the probability of this taking place. The “for” introducing the 24th verse gives the ground for the apostle's confidence of Israel's restoration. He regards it as an easier process than that which has already occurred, the calling of the Gentiles. It is, thus, a more probable event. Israel is represented in his figure as the natural branches. They had the adoption, the glory, the covenants and all other things mentioned earlier in chapter 9, verses 4 and 5. In particular and supremely, they have the Messiah, God over all and blessed forever. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had only a dim vestige of the existence of God and a fallible conscience that generally accused them. Take a look back at chapter 1, verse 18 through chapter 2 and verse 16. How much more likely, then, that the natural branches would be regrafted into the tree than that the Gentiles would ever be called? It is another of Paul's from the greater, or a fortiori, arguments.

The last words of the verse, “their own olive tree,” emphatic in the original, are quite important. It recalls chapter 3, verse 1 and verse 2, where Paul makes the point that Israel still has an “advantage,” in that the nation possesses the Messianic promises of God. Murray comments, “The patriarchal root is never uprooted to give place to another planting.” The phrase underlines the fact that the Abrahamic Covenant promises are unconditional, certain to be fulfilled to elect Israel and elect Gentiles through the seed, the Son of David and Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us never forget that it is their olive tree: we Gentiles share in their covenantal blessings. Professor Achtemeier was right, if we're going to get the blessing of God, we must get it through Abraham, we Gentiles.

Now Paul's conclusion and our conclusion. As we observe the human scene today, there is every indication that Paul's words are receiving vindication. In the first place, there is hardly any question that modern Judaism is spiritually bankrupt. It is basically an ethical system with no real redemptive program for lost sinners. Some years ago Time carried an article on Judaism, and in it was this description of its state, “For Judaism is a this-worldly rather than an otherworldly religion; its basis is action rather than dogma. Obedience to the law is far more important than belief. For the Law is truth set forth in terms of action.”

We do not deny that it is important that we obey. And we do not deny that ethics is important. But we affirm that right ethics follow and flow from right belief.

Ze'ev Chafets has just written a book about Israel with the engaging title, Heroes and Hustlers, Hard Hats and Holy Men. Mr. Chafets is an American Israeli, born in Pontiac, Michigan, but now an Israeli after almost twenty years in Israel. He speaks in the opening pages of his first trip to Israel, when he had no real notion of the nature of the country for which he was bound. Quoting him he says, “In Pontiac, Michigan, where I was born and raised, we belonged to a Stevensonian Reform temple whose primary religious doctrines consisted of ‘Be a good person,’ and ‘Don't forget to say hello to Aunt Mae after services.’” Sad to say, that is also theology typical of perhaps the majority of Protestant churches today. Paul would have been quite unhappy with that analysis of the Law of Moses and salvation.

Mr. Chafets also makes a statement concerning the land in the early pages of his book with which, I believe, the biblical writers would have expressed profound disagreement. He calls the place “a country like any other.” It is true that the country possesses a uniquely evocative geography and history. It also, however, is the theme of thrilling prophecies written by holy men who by the moving of God the Spirit dipped their pens in a rainbow to record them. That land is not like any other on the face of the globe, and logic, as Paul spells it out in Romans 11, covenantal history, and prophecy

argue with divine compulsion for its future glory. We Gentile believers, we too, who have in grace embraced the Messiah, look forward to the day of its coming.

We're glad to have had you with us today in our broadcast. The fifth of the messages to be given next week is entitled "Israel Saved by the Deliverer From Zion." I hope you'll be listening then.