

week 7 seven

Discover

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, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: **3** “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? **4** And what was God's answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” **5** So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. **6** And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

7 What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, **8** as it is written: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day.”

9 And David says: “May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. **10** May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.”

11 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. **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. **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.

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. **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.

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. **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!

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. **27** And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”



Discover

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. **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.

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.



Discover

Olive trees are not uncommon in the Phoenix valley but I spent my childhood in the thicket of Arkansas where olives were sequestered in aluminum cans at the grocery store. I remember the first time I became aware that I was staring at an olive tree. I was a twenty-one year old doe eyed college student packed tightly between my peers and our luggage in a bus bound for our new home in the outskirts of Florence, Italy. My eyes drank deeply of cypress trees, those green pillars that pierced the blue sky, honeycomb villas topped with tiled roofs in a rustic orange, and, of course, groves of olive trees. When the wind rustles the leaves of an olive tree and they catch the light of a noonday sun the result is a tree that shimmers in a silver glow. Throughout my semester abroad, I spent many afternoons resting beneath the leaves of the olive trees near our home to catch a glimpse of that magical moment. I could not place the words but I remembered that scripture spoke of the branches of these trees cut and “grafted” into another tree.

Olive trees possess the remarkable ability for a branch to be cut from one tree and attached to an open wound of another tree. That branch is nourished by the roots of the new tree. Paul uses this process to describe the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles. Both trees are wounded for this process to take place. A branch is severed from a wild tree that is unkept and uncultivated by the gardener. A branch from the tended tree is cut off and discarded or it's bark is sliced and pulled away from the tree to make space for the new branch. A portion of the Jews are removed from the tree in order that there is a place for the Gentiles to take root and find nourishment. I sense a sober tone from Paul because there is a cutting, a wounding, that takes place in both communities in order for this process to take place. As a preacher and teacher instructed with proclaiming the good news to the Gentiles, Paul has a reason to rejoice that the community he serves are invited to be called children of God. But Paul mourns that the majority of his kinsmen are not a part of the remnant, the Jesus followers who are ethnically Jewish.

In this passage, we discover an incredible contrast between the first Jesus followers and modern followers particularly our communities that are immersed in the culture of America. Paul embodies this contrast between the communal focus of these first followers and the individualism that is pervasive in our midst. Consider how Paul mourns for the whole of Israel, for the entire Jewish people. In this passage, Paul is not focused on the salvation of the individual but on the salvation of the community. It is the community that has experienced a hardening, what Douglass Moo refers to as a “spiritual insensitivity that prevents people from responding to God or to his message of salvation.” I witness our culture increasingly clutching individualism. When this self-focus is granted space, my concern is only for what affects me and those in my sphere of influence. The decisions and actions of others are of no consequence unless they directly impact my lifestyle. The pain and suffering experienced by others does not capture my attention unless I am sharing in their pain. This is not the attitude of Paul and does not reflect the attitude of God who, despite worship of Baal, preserved a remnant from among the Jewish people in the era of the prophet Elijah and, despite rejection of Jesus, preserved a remnant of which Paul is a part.





Discover

So great is God's care for the Jewish community that their hardening is not forever. "And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again." *Romans 11:23*
As a whole, the church is severed and fractured and I sense a great lack of concern as a community for every part of this body. Have we forgotten that we are a part of the same body? Have we forgotten that we are a part of the same tree? Have we so quickly forgotten that the actions and decisions of one part of our community affect us all? Have we forgotten the heart of God whose grace preserves his people in order that all will be welcomed to find nourishment from the roots of his tree.

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

Our God is the lifeblood flowing out to sustain every part of this body. Our God is the water and nourishment that allows this tree to grow and flourish. Our God binds us to one another.



Pray

Monday

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, whom he foreknew. Romans 11:1-2

God of Abraham,

We give thanks for your selection of the Hebrews as your special people through which you have made yourself known to the whole world. We see in them a reflection of ourselves, a fickleness between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. We rejoice because of the love, patience and faithfulness that you showed to them and you also extend to us. Though we at times inwardly judge the people of Israel harshly, we recognise that our salvation came to us through them. Thank you for your loving grace throughout history.

Tuesday

“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.” Romans 11:5-6

God of Israel,

Thank you for the remnant of Israel that throughout history by your grace has been faithful to your covenant. We admit that like the people of Israel we struggle with the thought that we can make ourselves acceptable to you by the things that we do. Help us to put aside such thinking and through your grace enter into a relationship with you. Just like it was your actions that made Israel it is only through your actions in Jesus that we can be made your people. Thank you for your loving grace throughout history.

Wednesday

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. 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! Romans 11:11-12

God of the Jews,

We look at recent history and we see how the Jewish people have been mistreated, ostracized and exterminated. We lament and are pained by this and we ask for forgiveness for the parts that we have played in their oppression. Help us to love our Jewish neighbors knowing that you selected them as your special people to bring salvation to us, the Gentiles. We pray that they will see the fulfillment of your first covenant in your son Jesus and be part of the new Israel. Thank you for your loving grace throughout history.



Pray

Thursday

“For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? 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

God of the Gentiles,

Thank you that even though we are not children of Israel, that you have called us into your family. That through faith we have been grafted into your kingdom like branches on a tree. Keep us from arrogance and pride in our new found status with you. We acknowledge that if we fall back into unbelief that we will be cut off from the kindness of your kingdom. We praise you that everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, are welcomed into the love of your kingdom. Thank you for your loving grace throughout history.

Friday

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”

“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?”

For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

God of Everyone,

How can we ever wrap our minds around your riches or the depth of your wisdom or the marvel of your perfect knowledge? How could we ever explain the wonder of your decisions or search out the mysterious way you carry out your plans? Who among us has discovered how you think or is wise enough to give you advice? Has any of us ever given you something so great that it obligates you to owe us in return? Because you are the source and sustainer of everything and everything finds fulfillment in you, we give you praise and honor forever!.



Reflect

The following questions are designed to help you reflect more deeply on the themes we explore together as we journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. I invite you to make space to sit with these questions without any need for a quick or clear answer. As you settle into a quiet and comfortable space, I encourage you to discuss these questions with God. Ask God to prompt you, to guide your thoughts, or bring up new questions that could be more helpful to you.

- 1 We usually read scripture from the perspective of the individual with a keen focus on how the text impacts one person or a small group. How does your understanding of this passage change or remain the same when you read from this communal focus?
- 2 How do you notice the actions or behavior of one part of the body of Jesus followers affecting the whole? Consider this question from both a positive and negative perspective.
- 3 What strikes you about God's response to the Jewish people?
- 4 In the midst of individualism and the fracturing of our society, how can we increase our awareness that as followers of Jesus we are a part of one body, we belong to the same tree? What action does this communal focus require of us?
- 5 What strikes you about the "grafting" process that Paul describes to illustrate the inclusion of Gentiles?



Embody

Our Story is God's Story

A central aim for Paul in this passage is to remind the Jewish Jesus followers in Rome that God's invitation to the Gentiles is not proof that God is unfaithful to the Jewish people, the heirs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Paul justifies his claims about the character of God using his own experience as evidence. Paul is a Jew who, despite his persecution of the church, God did not forsake but called to be the bearer of good news to the Gentiles. "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. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew." *Romans 11:1-2* Not only is Paul a part of the remnant of Jews preserved by God as followers of Jesus, Paul embodies God's vision for the Jewish people that through them all nations would be blessed by God. Paul challenges his audience's limited perspective on God's grand vision by calling their attention to himself. "Look at me! Look at what God has done in my life!"

What part of God's character, God's nature, do you carry in your body? What story does your life tell? What story does your life reveal about who God is? We are evidence of the heart of God. I invite you to make space for reflection with God around your answers to these questions and consider how you can express the nature of God that you embody more fully in the world around you.

