

The Mystery of Israel

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 8, 2022.

If the dough offered as firstfruits 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 the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward 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 fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided 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 from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob;
and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all (Romans 11:16–32).¹

As defined, a mystery is “Something that is difficult or impossible to understand or explain.”² To solve a mystery we look for clues, relying upon deductive reasoning. Some mysteries are more easier to solve than others. For example, when we consider the general revelation of the universe, when we look at the splendor of the heavens and earth, it is *not* difficult to deduce that it was designed and created by God: Indeed, “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (1:20). It is not difficult to solve the mystery of creation’s origin, even a child can deduce it. It is only the fool who says in his heart, “There is no God” (Ps. 14:1).

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² “Mystery,” Lexico, accessed May 4, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/mystery>.

There are, however, some mysteries that are not easily deduced, even unsolvable, impossible to understand. That is, unless God reveals it by his special revelation. This is the kind of mystery Paul refers to when he says, “I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers” (11:25). By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God has revealed this mystery to Paul and through Paul to us as Holy Scripture.

What is the mystery, previously unknown but now revealed by God? It is this: “a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (11:25). Knowing this helps explain so much! Think about it: This mystery revealed helps explain the Jews’ unbelief during Jesus’ earthly ministry, their rejection and crucifixion of him, and ongoing unbelief after his resurrection. This helps explain why so many Jewish people throughout the world still have not believed in their Messiah. This also explains why so many Gentiles have been brought into God’s church at the exclusion of so many Jews. This helps explain so much, so much so that we must not be ignorant of it. So, let’s consider this carefully.

Broken off

Let’s begin with this question: If “a partial hardening has come upon Israel,” who is Israel? Paul uses the name Israel in several different ways in his epistle to the Romans. For example in Romans 9:6, Paul clarifies, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” This is similar to his distinction that “no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Rom. 2:29). In this dual use of the name Israel, there are naturally-born Jews, comprising Israel, not as a specific country but as a collective people, and then there are spiritual Jews, children of Abraham by faith (4:11), comprising spiritual Israel. Context typically helps distinguish which is which.

So, which is which in this mystery of Israel? Who is this partially-hardened Israel? In general, when Paul means *spiritual* Israel, he is referring to all who are children of God through faith, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin. When Paul means natural Israel, he may be referring to ancient Israel or Jewish people as a whole. So, context dictates that we understand this mystery to be referring to natural Israel, Jewish people throughout the world.

To help us understand this mystery of Israel, Paul provides the metaphor of a cultivated olive tree, representing God’s church. Now, if we remember our church history going back to Abraham and the patriarchs, we know that originally the church consisted not exclusively but primarily of Jews. So, the natural descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were the natural branches. They enjoyed a special relationship with God in his church, unlike the wild olive tree of the Gentile world. But according to the severity of God (11:22), the Jewish people stumbled over Christ in their unbelief, and God broke them off, broken branches from the tree of God’s church. Such is the case for over two thousand years; the majority of the Jewish people have been broken off.

Broken branches, however, say nothing of the health of the tree. The tree of God’s church is alive and thriving. As the root remains healthy, so does the tree. But is the tree temporarily a branchless tree? Not at all! At Pentecost, the most unique event occurred: Gentiles were grafted in, being nourished from the root up.

Grafted in

Grafting is a horticultural practice where a small branch, or shoot, from one tree is attached to another to grow a new branch. In Paul's use of the metaphor, Gentiles are branches from a wild olive tree, grafted onto the broken stems of the cultivated olive tree. It is a grafting done by God's sovereign grace in Christ. God never intended to have a branchless tree as his church but to graft in new branches, from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

We see this grafting in most evidently in Christ's Great Commission, in which he commands his church: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). The Great Commission is a great ingathering, that there be a great engrafting. It is also ongoing, "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (11:25), meaning there will come a day when the natural branches of Israel will be grafted back into the church.

Interestingly, Paul tells of both the broken branches of Israel and our engrafting with words of caution: "do not be arrogant toward the branches...do not become proud, but fear" (11:18, 20). Why does he do this? I think there are several reasons.

First, we tend to think of ourselves and our ability more highly than we ought, and fear God less. How often do we read the pages of the Old Testament and distinguish ourselves from those who have gone before us? How often do we forget that but for the grace of God we too would have shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21). Apart from the mercy of God, we too would have demanded, "His blood is on us and on our children!" (Matt. 27:25). Apart from the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, we would never have confessed with our mouth that Jesus is Lord or believed in our heart that God raised him from the dead (10:9). No, when we consider the broken branches of Israel, it should humble us—"For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you" (11:21).

Second, we must guard against pride and arrogance. We tend to confuse the Lord's provision and sustaining strength with our own. As Paul reminds us, "it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you" (11:18). How many of us who believe that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone live as if it's up to us alone? Just as God saved and sustained his Old Covenant people, so he saves and sustains his New Covenant people, for it is the Holy Spirit as our "Deliverer" that enables us to believe the gospel and it is the Holy Spirit as our Sustainer who empowers us to live for Christ. So, let us guard against pride and arrogance but in humility look to Jesus, "the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2).

Third, we tend to forget our past and ignore our future. Contrary to the belief of many Protestants, church history did not begin at Christ's resurrection or his ascension (or the Protestant Reformation). Church history began in the beginning, and so we look back with gratitude to God's revelation to Israel and the "adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (9:4). With gratitude we remember: "To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (9:5). But we must also remember what is to come, when "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" and the end of time draws near (11:25). In God's perfect timing, a remnant of Israel, representing the whole, will

believe the gospel. Quoting Isaiah, Paul writes, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved” (9:27), leading Paul to conclude, “And in this way all Israel will be saved” (11:26).

To further explain this, Paul provides two metaphors in verse sixteen. The first references God’s command that Israel offer the “first fruits,” or first part, of their bread dough upon settling in the Promised Land (Num. 15:17-21): From the first grain harvest, Israel would mill, prepare, and bake bread enjoying the blessing of the land. But the first portion belongs to the Lord, representative of the whole: “If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump” (11:16 a). The second metaphor is that of a root to a tree. “Tall oaks from little acorns grow,” so the saying goes, and a tree grows upward and outward from its root. So, the one root is representative of the tree’s many branches: “if the root is holy, so are the branches” (11:16 b). So, in this sense “all Israel will be saved,” when “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in,” and then, and only then, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins” (11:26-27).

Grown Together

So what of this olive tree, God’s church, today and in the future? Will the natural branches always be broken off? Under the Old Covenant, God’s church consisted primarily of Jews, natural branches of the tree. Under the New Covenant, God’s church has grown primarily through Gentiles, wild branches grafted in. But when Christ returns, his church will consist of Jews and Gentiles, all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul explains it to the Ephesians, since Christ “has made us both [Jew and Gentile alike] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph. 2:14-16), so we will be grown together from the root up into a healthy, thriving tree.

And in this we see how the kindness and severity of God (11:22), seemingly a mystery before, now reveals the sovereign mercy of God. As Paul puts it, “just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of [Israel’s] disobedience, so they too have not been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (11:30-32). We were disobedient to God. Israel was disobedient to God. Yet, God has shown mercy to us and he will show mercy to Israel. He is God; we are not, and he “has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”

And so, as we gather in worship, we pray. With reverence and awe, we praise God for who he is, acknowledging his riches, wisdom, and knowledge and confessing his unsearchable judgments and inscrutable ways. We offer up our thanksgiving, knowing that from him and through him and to him are all things. And we submit our petitions, praying as the *Westminster Directory of Public Worship* directs us, for “the propagation of the gospel and kingdom of Christ to all

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nations; for the conversion of the Jews, the fulness of the Gentiles, the fall of Antichrist, and the hastening of the second coming of our Lord.”³

For, in our praying we are mindful of the mystery of Israel, their future restoration and re-engrafting into the church, but also our union with them. As Paul challenges us to think, “if [Israel’s] trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! . . . For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? (11:12, 15). Life from the dead?! Such are the mysteries of God, such is the mercy of God. There is much with God that is unsearchable, indeed inscrutable, but behind the mystery is the revelation of his glory. So, let us remember this:

God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform;
he plants His footsteps in the sea
and rides upon the storm

Deep in unsearchable mines
of never-failing skill
he treasures up His bright designs
and works His sovereign will

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense
but trust Him for His grace
behind a frowning providence
he hides a smiling face.⁴

³ *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., 2008), 89.

⁴ “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 128.