

Lent 5

Romans 11:11-21 – Do You Know Your Family Tree?

March 20-22, 2010 by: Pastor Wessel

Romans 11:11-21 ¹¹Again I ask: Did [Israel] 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. ¹²But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

¹³I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry ¹⁴in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶If 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.

¹⁷If 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, ¹⁸do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." ²⁰Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Introduction – Are you interested in your family's genealogy? In my family tree, besides Wessel, there are names like Eichsteadt, Zabel, and Nolte. Studying family trees can be very interesting if you follow the ends of the branches (our lives) back to another branch to another to find a trunk and dig down into the roots. If we could trace back far enough, do you know where we would end up? With Noah and his family coming out of the ark after the flood.

Some people seem intrigued and really interested in family trees. Others seem to feel about genealogy the way they feel about all history – it's just about a bunch of people who aren't around anymore, so what does it matter to my life now?

Lisa Kudrow, famous for being on the TV sitcom "Friends", has helped develop a British TV show for American audiences, called *Who Do You Think You Are?* In March and April, viewers of the show get to follow celebrities like former Dallas Cowboy Emmitt Smith and Lisa Kudrow herself as they follow the branches of their family tree closer to its roots. Many of those who participate discover things that are very shocking or unusual in their family tree or discover a nice surprise, perhaps someone famous.

In the Old Testament, family trees were very important. God had blessed a man named Israel, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, with 12 sons and every descendent of Israel could trace their family history back to one of the 12 sons. There are numerous genealogies, lists of names recorded for us in the Bible, at important times in history. We even have the genealogy of Jesus recorded in Matthew and Luke.

Is it good to know where you came from – your family origins? God says it's good to appreciate and learn from those who came before us. That doesn't mean you have to enjoy learning all the names and dates of historical events. But it is good to know where you fit into this world and maybe even be humbled a little, when you realize we are one of many people who have lived on the face of the earth, but that also God is concerned about each one of us, insignificant as we may seem on the grand scale of history.

It should be no surprise, but God tells us that there are some pretty famous people in our family tree. Names like Abraham and Sarah, Israel and Rachel, Ruth, David, Mary and Joseph are part of our famous family tree.

Do you know your family tree?

I. God planted the tree (by his grace)

The family tree that we are talking about today is not your normal family tree. It is made up of those who become family by having faith in God and all his promises. That means that parents and children, husbands and wives, grandparents and cousins, might find themselves in different families because some may have faith in God and some may not.

I mentioned Noah before. In our family of people, where everyone looks to God, we could look to Noah. He was a believer who trusted in the promises of God, built his boat, and he and his family were saved from the destructive waters of the great flood that covered the earth.

But in the Bible, to start the family tree, God usually goes back to the people we call the Patriarchs, the Forefathers of the family of believers. The patriarchs would be Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who was also known as Israel. It was them and their descendents whom God chose, out of all the people living on the earth at that time. He chose them for a special purpose. God had promised to send someone to bring salvation to the world, to rescue us from certain death. This person had to be born somewhere, from some family. God promised these Patriarchs and their people that the Savior

would be part of their family tree. Out of all the nations on earth, the nation of Israel before the birth of Jesus Christ had a special purpose. They were the light of hope for the rest of the world, holding on firmly to the promise of the Savior until the time of his arrival.

If we look at the illustration of the olive tree in our verses from Romans, God's Old Testament people are really the root of the olive tree. God planted his people in the Promised Land and preserved them through the work of their spiritual leaders, his chosen prophets, who declared God's Word to them. The leaders were men like Samuel, King David, King Solomon, Elijah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. To every generation, God proclaimed his word to his people, condemning their sins, but offering hope to sorrow filled hearts, holding before their eyes the relief of forgiveness and everlasting life.

Through the tribe of Levi and the sacrifices in the Tabernacle and the Temple, God drew a picture for the people, a picture of his mercy to sinners. He showed them that they would not have to endure the punishment of their sins, but God would provide a substitute who would come to take their place and set them free from their guilt. Through God's ongoing reminder of his presence and his promise of the Savior, the promise that had been planted in the hearts of the Patriarchs was watered by God's Word and it grew into a strong and mighty tree as each generation spread its branches wider and wider.

But, sadly, the history of God's people comes with many warnings. There were many who believed. But there were many who did not. That is the transgression of Israel that Paul talks about –the rejection of God and his promises. They too often forgot the fact that God, in his grace, had made them a special people, freeing them from their Egyptian slave masters and giving them a land of their own. As a result, even though their ancestry told them they were descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, the fact that they did not believe snapped off their branch from the tree of God's life-giving promises. They lost their part in the family of faith and so lost all the blessings that come with it.

That history continued at the time of Christ. Although many were waiting for the Messiah, specially chosen to save his people, few believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the one. We heard about that in the Gospel for today. Because of unbelief, their branches were broken off the tree. But Mary and Joseph, Simeon in the Temple, Simon Peter, Nathanael, Paul and many others trusted that he was who he claimed to be. They witnessed the fact that he had come and many witnessed the fact that he had risen from the dead. Through faith in Jesus Christ, these Jewish descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel remained on the tree, being nourished by the life-giving sap of God's Word.

What saddens Paul so much in this section of his letter is that so few of his fellow Israelites had believed. At first he was just like them, but God, in his grace, changed Paul's heart and opened his eyes to see the truth. So Paul's desire for his people is that the Holy Spirit would open their eyes and show them what a wonderful blessing the people of the other nations, the Gentiles, were enjoying, but they were missing. He hopes that they will be filled with envy in a good way and eagerly desire those blessings for their own lives.

II. God keeps the tree alive (by his grace)

It makes us sad, too, when we think about the special blessings God gave to this special nation on earth, but so many would not believe. They were chosen by God to be the bearers of the promise, the genetic ancestry of Jesus Christ as far as his human nature is concerned. Why couldn't more of the people at the time of Jesus and Paul see that the Messiah was there, announcing his arrival after years of waiting? Why would they not believe?

In fact, it is a miracle of the Holy Spirit that anyone believes. Our eyes cannot see the face of God. Our ears cannot hear the voice of God. Our sinful nature blocks out the truth. It holds onto the devil's deception that we can make our own gods that suit our lives, that we can even be our own gods, deciding when and where we go and what is right and wrong.

But just as God, in his grace, called to faith in Christ a group of believers among the descendents of Israel, so he also calls to faith in Christ a group of believers among those who are not descended from Israel. The most important family tree is not the one which tells you who you were born from, but the one that says you were spiritually reborn.

In his grace, God called you, totally undeserving proclaiming that you are lost sinner, condemned because of your sin, but set free because Christ was punished for you. Like a person working in a tree nursery, the Holy Spirit cut you, a wild branch, off the wild, unbelieving sinful tree. And then he connected you to that cultivated tree, so that you could receive life from its roots. He gave you a new life through faith in Christ your Savior.

When Paul writes the letter to the Romans, he writes to a mixed group. Some were Jewish people who had been brought to faith in Christ as the promised Messiah. Others were Gentile believers, people from other nations, maybe Roman or Greek or Egyptian or Syrian. Really, all of them were minorities in an unbelieving society, but generally speaking there were more Gentiles who were brought to faith on Paul's missionary journeys than there were Jewish.

Paul teaches the non-Jewish believers to watch out and be careful of their attitude. They were well aware that the rejection and persecution by some of the Jewish leaders resulted in the gospel being proclaimed to the Gentiles. In other words, the unbelief of Israel resulted in life for them. Many of the natural branches, who should have welcomed the

Messiah with open arms, ended up getting cut off and other branches brought in to replace them. This was God's judgment on calloused unbelieving hearts and God's grace to those whom he chose to be his own.

But just because that had happened, it was no reason for the Gentile believers to look down on those from Israel who had rejected Christ. They should not be proud or boastful. Why not? Because it is only through the undeserved love of God that any of us believe. The clippers are ready. What happened to the Israelites could happen to anyone. Anyone who develops a callous on their hearts and conscience and no longer feels the sting of the law and the healing of the gospel will be cut off as well. If someone rejects God and his word and becomes an unbeliever, it doesn't matter who your parents are or how good a person you are. God says he will cut every unbeliever off, because, in essence, an unbeliever is a dead branch, no longer receiving nourishment from the roots and trunk.

God did not toss aside all the descendants of Abraham and say that nation was no longer useful. Paul was living proof of that. He was a Pharisee from the tribe of Benjamin. But it was at the time of Paul as it is now and always has been and always will be: We are saved by God's grace, through faith in his promise of forgiveness. Only those who believe in Christ as the promised Messiah, the capstone of God's holy temple, the sacrifice for our sins, will be saved, and it doesn't matter what you look like, how old you are, or what nation of the world you are from.

Conclusion – Dear friends, Bible History is *our* history; the heroes of faith among the Jewish people, whose lives we read about in God's word, are our spiritual ancestors, part of our family tree of believers. Think seriously about what a blessing God gave to that nation of Israel's descendants and how we have been blessed because God made their nation the nation from which our Savior was born.

By the grace of God, we have been grafted into the best family tree. Because we are still walking in this world, we know it isn't time yet to be with our family in heaven. Because we are still living in this world, that should tell us something – God still has more people to graft onto the family tree. Otherwise judgment day would have come already, because all his people would have been brought to faith.

Well, how are people brought to faith? How are branches grafted onto the tree? It happens when God's people spread the word about Christ our Savior and the Holy Spirit uses the message of Christ to change unbelievers into believers. It happens when you tell someone that the curse of sin and death is gone and there's no fear – all sins are paid for. It happens when you tell someone that Christ has arisen, just as he said. It happens when a person hears the gospel and by the Holy Spirit's power, trusts their life to that message.

Easter is a wonderful time to invite someone to hear that message. Want to give someone hope in the middle of a troubled economy? Want to encourage someone who is anxious because our world buckles under the pressure and kills with devastating earthquakes? Want to give someone the greatest gift you can give while they struggle with sickness and taxes and broken lives? Why not say, "Come with me on Easter Sunday. Come! Hear about how much God loves you." Amen.