The Olive Tree

A Five-Session Bible Study on Israel, the Church, and God’s Covenant Faithfulness

Adapted from teaching notes by Rev. Shannon Canoy

Expanded Bible study and participant workbook

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A Note to the Reader

This five-session study is adapted from my teaching notes, The Olive Tree: God's Covenant People and Plan. The notes develop the first lesson at length and begin a second; I have arranged their central themes into five sessions so that a group can follow the argument from Scripture, discuss it, and pray through it. Read every assigned passage in your own Bible before using the teaching and questions. Scripture references are supplied instead of extended quotations from a particular translation. The downloadable PDF includes a participant notes page for each session at the back.

The central picture comes from Romans 11:16–24. Paul writes to Gentile Christians who might be tempted to boast over Jewish people. His answer is an olive tree: some natural branches have been broken off because of unbelief, wild branches have been grafted in by faith, and God is able to graft natural branches in again. His warning calls us to humility. When this study connects that picture to questions about land, the modern State of Israel, or the timing of Daniel's prophecy, it presents my interpretation. Christians who confess Christ together differ on these questions. None of those differences gives us permission to despise Jewish people, excuse injustice against anyone, or treat a present-day government as beyond moral scrutiny.

Session 1 — Has God Rejected His People?

Read: Romans 9:1–8; 10:1–13; 11:1–15, 25–36.

Look closely: Before reaching the olive tree, trace Paul's argument from grief to praise. Romans 9 begins with his sorrow for fellow Israelites, and Romans 10 with his prayer for their salvation. Romans 11 asks whether God has rejected them and uses Paul's own identity and the remnant as evidence that he has not. The movement of these chapters keeps us from making Israel an impersonal item on an end-times chart. The person making the argument loves the people he is discussing. Hold together his insistence that Christ is the way of salvation and his refusal to say that God's promises have failed. Either point without the other distorts his purpose.

Paul enters Romans 9–11 grieving for his own people. He is not working through a cold puzzle. He longs for fellow Israelites to know the Messiah. At the same time he asks a question that has occupied the church for generations: if many of Israel have not believed in Jesus, has God's promise failed? His answer is no. God's word has not failed, and God has not rejected the people he foreknew. Paul points to himself, a Jewish believer in Christ, and to a remnant chosen by grace.

The three chapters belong together. Romans 9 considers God's sovereign purpose and the history of his promises. Romans 10 insists that righteousness is received by faith in Christ and that the gospel must be proclaimed. Romans 11 brings us to God's mercy toward Israel and the nations. Keeping these chapters together helps us resist two errors: boasting that we have earned our place, and assuming that God's patience toward Israel is exhausted.

Paul says Israel's hardening is partial and speaks of a future in which all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:25–26). Christians interpret the phrase “all Israel” in different ways. I understand Paul's words as pointing to a future turning of many Jewish people to Jesus the Messiah. The passage does not allow us to bypass Jesus: Paul says they are grafted in again if they do not continue in unbelief (11:23). The hope of restoration is a call to prayer and witness, never a reason for Gentile pride.

My teaching sometimes calls this emphasis “Restoration Theology.” By that phrase I mean that God's promises do not fail, that Jew and Gentile are saved through Christ, and that I expect his purposes for Israel to reach their fulfillment. It is a description of my reading of Scripture, not a claim that everyone who reads Romans 11 differently denies God's faithfulness.

Discuss: Why does Paul bring his grief into this teaching? What examples does he give that God has not rejected his people? What do Romans 10:12–13 and 11:23 say about how anyone is saved? Which future details are stated, and which do we infer?

Trace the passage: Mark Paul's expressions of grief, prayer, and praise in Romans 9–11. How should those emotions shape the way we discuss Israel?

Practice: Read Romans 9–11 in one sitting. Pray for Jewish people and Gentile people alike to know Jesus, and ask God to replace any pride in you with gratitude.

Session 2 — The Root and the Covenant Promise

Read: Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–8; Exodus 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 7:6–9; Romans 11:16–18.

Look closely: Genesis 12:1–3 includes three connected movements: God calls Abram to go, promises to make him a great nation and bless him, and says that all families of the earth will be blessed through him. Genesis 15 and 17 deepen the covenant and its promises. Exodus 19 describes Israel's calling after deliverance from Egypt, and Deuteronomy 7 explains that God's love and oath, not Israel's size, ground that choice. Romans 11 calls Gentile believers to remember that the root supports them. Paul does not tell us to transfer every detail of each older promise to ourselves without reading it in its own context; he tells us not to boast over the people through whom the promises came.

Before we focus on the branches, we need to ask about the root. Paul does not give a one-word definition of every part of his olive-tree image. In this study I understand the nourishing root in connection with God's promises to the patriarchs and his faithful purpose carried through Israel. The point Paul makes explicit is that Gentile believers do not support the root; the root supports them. We have entered a story that began before us.

God promised Abraham descendants, land, and blessing that would reach all the families of the earth. The promises grow across the Old Testament. Israel was called to be God's treasured people and a kingdom of priests. Deuteronomy insists that the Lord did not choose them because they were numerous or powerful. His choice revealed his love and faithfulness to the oath he made. The calling brought responsibility as well as privilege: the people were to show the nations what life under the Lord looks like.

Israel's history also includes disobedience, judgment, exile, and return. It would be careless to speak of the promises while ignoring the warnings in the same covenant story. Yet the prophets continue to call God's people back, and Paul refuses the conclusion that their failure has ended God's purpose. His image is one living tree, with some branches broken off and others sustained by grace. We cannot earn a place on it by ancestry, good works, or confidence in our own wisdom.

The story of Israel leads to Jesus, the Messiah who comes from this people and through whom the promised blessing reaches the nations. Christian gratitude for this inheritance must show itself in the way we speak about Jewish people. Paul specifically forbids boasting

against the branches (Romans 11:18). The church should be a place where that instruction can be heard clearly.

Discuss: What does God promise Abraham in Genesis 12 and 17? How does Deuteronomy describe the reason for Israel's election? In Romans 11:16–18, which details are explicit, and how does Paul use the image to correct Gentile arrogance? How can gratitude affect our speech today?

Trace the passage: Compare the recipients and purposes of the promises in Genesis 12, Exodus 19, and Romans 11. What stays connected, and what is newly revealed?

Practice: Make a short list of the gifts your church has received through the Scriptures and the history of Israel. Thank God for them without treating them as something you earned.

Session 3 — Natural Branches and Wild Branches

Read: Romans 11:16–24; Galatians 3:16, 26–29; Ephesians 2:11–22.

Look closely: Keep the olive-tree image close to Paul's own explanation. He identifies unbelief as the reason some branches were broken off and faith as the reason wild branches stand. He warns the new branches not to boast, then says God can graft the natural branches in again if they do not remain in unbelief. This is a moral argument directed at Gentile believers, not a license to treat every Jewish person as a symbol. Galatians 3 says believers in Christ share in Abraham's promise; Ephesians 2 describes those once far away brought near and made one. Read unity and continued identity together without assuming either passage answers every later question about land or nationhood.

Paul's illustration is deliberately humbling. Some natural branches are broken off because of unbelief. A wild olive shoot, representing Gentile believers, is grafted among the remaining branches and shares the tree's nourishment. The Gentile believer has no reason to boast over those who were broken off. If God did not spare the natural branches, Paul says, the wild branches must not become proud. If the natural branches do not continue in unbelief, God is able to graft them in again.

This is not a story of a second tree taking the first tree's place. It is a picture of participation by grace and of God's power to restore. Its immediate application is directed at Gentile Christians: do not be arrogant. A theological chart is useful only if it helps us listen to that warning. Any explanation of Israel and the Church that produces contempt has missed the force of Paul's words.

Galatians says that those who belong to Christ are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise. Paul declares that Jew and Greek have equal access to God in Christ. He does not require Gentiles to become Jews before they can inherit the blessing. Ephesians 2 likewise says those who were once far away have been brought near through Christ, who makes peace and creates one new humanity. These passages should be read alongside Romans 11 rather than used to silence it.

I believe the Church shares the promises through Christ without erasing Israel's identity or making God unfaithful to his word. Other Christians describe the continuity of God's people differently. We can test any account with the passages themselves: Does it honor salvation through Jesus alone? Does it preserve Paul's call to humility? Does it take both the unity in Christ and his insistence that God's calling is irrevocable seriously?

Discuss: What does the text say caused branches to be broken off and others to be grafted in? What warning does Paul give Gentile believers? What equal standing does Galatians 3 give believers in Christ? How does Ephesians 2 describe peace between those once separated?

Trace the passage: Underline Paul's commands to Gentile Christians in Romans 11:17–24. Which are about humility and faith, and which statements concern God's future ability?

Practice: Read Romans 11:18–24 slowly. Identify a place where Christians can replace boasting with listening, prayer, and a truthful witness to Jesus.

Session 4 — Land, Exile, and the Seventy Weeks

Read: Genesis 15:18–21; Leviticus 25:1–23; 26:33–35; 2 Chronicles 36:20–23; Jeremiah 29:10–14; Daniel 9:1–27.

Look closely: Leviticus says the land belongs to the Lord and that Israel is to allow it sabbath rest. The warning in chapter 26 and the later account in Chronicles connect exile to the land's desolation. Jeremiah and Daniel both speak into that history of loss and hope. Daniel responds to Jeremiah's seventy years with confession, then hears about seventy “sevens” determined for his people and city. These are related passages, but the seventy years of exile and seventy sevens are not interchangeable totals that we may simply multiply into a guaranteed modern date. Treat the land promise with seriousness and the later prophetic calculation with equal care about what each text actually states.

The promise to Abraham included land, and the law of Moses taught Israel how to live in it. Leviticus instructed the people to let the land rest every seventh year and reminded them that the land belonged to the Lord. The warnings of Leviticus 26 linked covenant disobedience with exile and the land's rest. Second Chronicles later connects the years of desolation to that rest. These passages ask us to see land as a trust under God's rule, not merely as an object of possession.

Daniel reads Jeremiah's promise about the seventy years of desolation and responds with confession and prayer. He does not turn immediately to calculation. He asks for mercy for Jerusalem because God's name is at stake. Then Gabriel speaks of seventy “sevens” concerning Daniel's people and holy city (Daniel 9:24–27). The passage marks seven sevens, sixty-two sevens, and a final seven. It speaks of an anointed one being cut off and of a later disruption of sacrifice. Its details have been interpreted in more than one way.

In my futurist understanding, a final seven-year period remains future, after an interval associated with the present age of the Church. Other Christians read the final seven differently. Daniel 9 does not explicitly call that interval “the Church age,” identify a modern political entity, give a universally agreed calendar date for the decree to rebuild Jerusalem, or name the actor of verse 27 the Antichrist. Those claims require further argument from multiple passages and should not be presented as words Daniel wrote.

My conviction that God has future purposes for Israel should also be distinguished from a claim that every decision of a modern government fulfills a biblical prophecy. Christians may care about Jewish safety, the dignity of Palestinians, and justice for all neighbors while

differing about contemporary politics. Scripture calls us to truth, mercy, and peacemaking as we discuss disputed questions.

Discuss: How does Leviticus describe the land and its rest? What does Daniel do before he hears the prophecy? What time divisions and purposes does Daniel 9 actually state? Which steps in a futurist timeline depend on interpretation beyond the chapter?

Trace the passage: What does Leviticus 25:23 say about ultimate ownership of the land? Why does Daniel 9 begin with confession before presenting further numbers?

Practice: On a page, make two columns: “Daniel says” and “My interpretation.” Use them to read Daniel 9:24–27 carefully before consulting a timeline.

Session 5 — Israel's Calling and the Hope of Restoration

Read: Isaiah 49:1–6; Ezekiel 36:22–28; Zechariah 12:10; Romans 11:25–36; Revelation 21:1–5.

Look closely: Isaiah 49 links the servant's mission to both Israel and the nations; Ezekiel speaks of cleansing and a new heart; Romans 11 ends with mercy toward disobedient people and worship of God's wisdom. These passages are not identical pictures, yet together they help explain why I speak of hope for restoration through Jesus. In this reading, God keeps his purposes for Israel while the Gentiles receive mercy in Christ. Some Christians understand the relationship differently, so state clearly when a future sequence is an inference rather than a sentence from one passage. The hope we share is the Lord making all things new, with his people responding in faith and humility now.

Israel was chosen for a purpose wider than itself. Isaiah describes the servant bringing light to the nations. God's covenant story moves toward blessing beyond one people, and Christians confess Jesus as the Messiah through whom that blessing reaches us. The gospel invites Jew and Gentile alike to trust him. We do not have to minimize Israel's story to make room for the nations; God had the nations in view from the beginning.

Ezekiel speaks of gathering, cleansing, a new heart, and God's Spirit. Zechariah portrays mourning and a turning toward the one who was pierced. Romans 11 speaks of a partial hardening until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in and then declares that all Israel will be saved. I read these passages as grounds to expect a future widespread turning of Jewish people to Jesus. I also believe God will fulfill his covenant purposes in a renewed creation. These are theological conclusions formed by reading several texts together, not an excuse to assign a date to each present event.

The modern State of Israel is a political state established in 1948. It has deep connections to Jewish history and identity, but its existence alone does not settle how every ancient promise will be fulfilled. Scripture's statements about God's people and modern policy questions need careful, separate treatment. Christians should reject antisemitism and also uphold the dignity and safety of all people made in God's image. Our confidence belongs to the God who keeps his word, not to our ability to decode headlines.

Paul ends his discussion with worship, marveling at the depth of God's wisdom. Revelation closes with the Lord making all things new. That is a fitting end to this study. The tree calls

us to humility; the covenants call us to trust; the gospel calls us to welcome those who come through Christ; and the promise of restoration calls us to pray and live faithfully now.

Discuss: What does Isaiah say about the nations? What kind of restoration does Ezekiel 36 describe? How does Paul close Romans 11? What is the difference between a biblical hope for restoration and a prediction about today's news?

Trace the passage: In each assigned passage, identify who acts, who receives, and what restoration involves. Which conclusions require reading the passages together?

Practice: Pray for peace, justice, and the knowledge of Christ among Jewish and Gentile people. Ask what it would look like for your church to bear witness without arrogance.

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Read: Romans 9:1–8; 10:1–13; 11:1–15, 25–36.

Observe the passage

Mark Paul's expressions of grief, prayer, and praise in Romans 9–11. How should those emotions shape the way we discuss Israel?

Understand what it means

What does this passage say clearly? Where does an interpretation bring in other texts or assumptions?

Respond and pray

What will you do or pray differently because you read this passage?

Session 2 — The Root and the Covenant Promise

Read: Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–8; Exodus 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 7:6–9; Romans 11:16–18.

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Underline Paul's commands to Gentile Christians in Romans 11:17–24. Which are about humility and faith, and which statements concern God's future ability?

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Read: Genesis 15:18–21; Leviticus 25:1–23; 26:33–35; 2 Chronicles 36:20–23; Jeremiah 29:10–14; Daniel 9:1–27.

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What does Leviticus 25:23 say about ultimate ownership of the land? Why does Daniel 9 begin with confession before presenting further numbers?

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What does this passage say clearly? Where does an interpretation bring in other texts or assumptions?

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Read: Isaiah 49:1–6; Ezekiel 36:22–28; Zechariah 12:10; Romans 11:25–36; Revelation 21:1–5.

Observe the passage

In each assigned passage, identify who acts, who receives, and what restoration involves. Which conclusions require reading the passages together?

Understand what it means

What does this passage say clearly? Where does an interpretation bring in other texts or assumptions?

Respond and pray

What will you do or pray differently because you read this passage?