

# MORE SEED & BREAD, ISSUE NO. 331

## THE GOOD OLIVE TREE: OUT ON A LIMB

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The good olive tree (Rom. 11:11-25) is an analogy which is used by two different camps of dispensationalists to support their particular views regarding the purpose of God's works in the Acts period. Mid-Acts dispensationalists (Dispensation of Grace begins at Acts 9 or 13) say the tree shows the fading away of Israel and shows the birth of a new company of believers in a new dispensation. Acts 28:28 dispensationalists (Dispensation of Grace begins at Acts 28:28) say the tree shows God working in Acts to call out a remnant of Israel for His Kingdom, and shows God working to take out of the Gentiles a people for His name, for a Kingdom purpose. We will compare the views of both camps.

### WHAT IS THE GOOD OLIVE TREE?

**Mid-Acts:** The good olive tree represents two programs operating during the Acts period. The first is God's Kingdom program which He works through the nation of Israel during early Acts. The second appears later (at Acts 9 or 13), when God unexpectedly switches to his second program. At this point, the tree takes on a new identity, that of representing this new program, the Dispensation of Grace, which had never been revealed before (Eph. 3:1-5, *NKJV* throughout; *KJV* when noted). No hint of this new dispensation can be found in the Old Testament or Gospels; not a single prophecy predicts it. It had been hidden in God (Eph. 3:9). With this dispensation comes the opportunity for the Gentiles to receive salvation apart from Israel. A new company is formed with largely Gentile believers, known as the church (*ekklesia*), the body of Christ (Eph 4:12, Col.1:24, Eph. 1:22-23, 1 Cor 12:27).

**Acts 28:28:** The good olive tree represents Israel's program of blessings. This includes the covenants, the promises, and the fathers (Rom. 9:4).

**WHO ARE THE NATURAL BRANCHES BROKEN OFF? And if some of the branches were broken off. . .** (Rom. 11:17).

**Mid-Acts:** The natural branches are Israel, and the breaking off of these branches is symbolic of Israel's fall as a nation at the stoning of Stephen. Shortly after the fall, God switches programs (at Acts 9 or 13) and begins working with His new company of believers, who are Gentiles, for the most part. One exception—a small remnant of believing Israel remains on the tree, Israel's little flock (Luke 12:32). This remnant, however, diminishes steadily (Rom. 11:12, *KJV*), to the point of fading off the scene altogether by the close of Acts.

**Acts 28:28:** The natural branches are Israel, but the ones broken off do not represent the entire nation, only unbelieving, individual Jews who are hardened (Rom. 11:25). Since only some of the branches are broken off, as seen in the verse, it follows that other natural branches remain on the tree; a remnant of branches, we could say. This remnant turns out to be associated with a prophecy. **For though your people, O Israel, be as the sand of the sea, A remnant of them will return** (Isa. 10:22). This prophecy sees a fulfillment in the Acts period (Rom. 9:27). *Since the remnant is found in prophecy, how can it exist within a brand-new dispensation never revealed? It cannot.* Throughout Acts the Lord is working to call out this remnant of Israel for His Kingdom. The entire Acts period sees the gospel carried to Jews everywhere (Mark 16:20, Acts 1:8) for this purpose. *As for claiming that Israel fades away in Acts, the opposite is true* (Acts 21:20). It is not the nation that fades, or diminishes (Rom. 11:12, *KJV*). What diminishes is the

*number of Jews found in Israel's company.* The unbelieving Jews, remember, are "broken off," thus reducing their total count.

**WHO ARE THE WILD BRANCHES GRAFTED IN? . . . and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree** (Rom 11:17).

**Mid-Acts:** The wild branches represent Gentiles, specifically the church, the body of Christ, the new company of mostly Gentile believers formed in the Dispensation of Grace.

**Acts 28:28:** The wild branches represent Gentiles, but only a limited number as we will see later on. These Gentiles, like the remnant above, are associated with a prophecy (Amos 9:11-12). James confirms that this prophecy is being fulfilled in the Acts period. Starting with the house of Cornelius and continuing on through Acts, **God did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name** (Acts 15:14). *Since this work of calling out Gentiles for His name is predicted in Amos, how can these Gentiles belong to a new company in a new dispensation that was hidden in God until this time? They cannot.*

**WHY HAS SALVATION COME TO THE GENTILES? I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles** (Rom 11:11).

**Mid-Acts:** Salvation comes to the Gentiles in Acts in order to form a new company of believers, the church (*ekklesia*), the body of Christ in the new Dispensation of Grace.

**Acts 28:28:** Salvation comes to the Gentiles in Acts for the purpose of provoking Israel to jealousy, as the verse says. It should not surprise us to learn that this act of provoking is a subject of prophecy. **They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation** (Deut. 32:21). This prophecy is fulfilled in the Acts period (Rom. 10:19). *Since these Gentiles in Acts had been prophesied, again, how can it be said they comprise a company that had never been revealed? It cannot.*

**WHO IS THE "FOOLISH NATION" PROVOKING ISRAEL TO JEALOUSY? I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation, I will move you to anger by a foolish nation** (Rom.10:19, Deut. 32:21).

**Mid-Acts:** In early Acts, the group considered to be the "foolish nation" is the little flock (Luke 12:32), the believing remnant of Israel. These fit the description of "foolish" by their low educational and social standings (Acts 4:13). Jealousy is provoked in unbelieving Jews when miraculous signs follow the Jews who believe (Mark 16:17-18) through the ministry of the little flock. In this way, the unbelieving Jews are provoked to believe in their Messiah. When God switches programs in Acts, a new provoking company takes over. Now, the church, the body of Christ is the agent used to provoke the Jews. To this end, God temporarily bestows Paul with miraculous gifts for the start-up of the new dispensation (never mind that the Dispensation of Grace is a time of God's silence, with no visible signs or miracles). When Israelites see their spiritual signs being worked among the Gentiles, they are provoked to emulate (Rom. 11:14, *KJV*) the Gentiles by believing in Christ so they can become members of . . . the new company, the church, the body of Christ of the Dispensation of Grace.

**Acts 28:28:** The "foolish nation" are the Gentiles in Acts who come to trust Christ through faith, and thereby become partakers of Israel's blessings (Rom 11:17, 15:27). *Nation*, singular, need not mean a single political nation. The word *nation* comes from words (Heb-*gowy*; Gk-*ethnos*) which translate into the synonyms *Gentiles* and *people*. The Gentiles are foolish people in that they lack understanding of the

person and plans of God. *Since the foolish nation is yet another element of the olive tree analogy foretold in Scripture (Deut. 32:21), how can it play a part in a new, secret program never revealed? It cannot.*

**WHAT IS THE FULLNESS OF THE GENTILES? . . . blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Rom. 11:25).**

**Mid-Acts:** The fullness of the Gentiles is the time when the church, the body of Christ is complete, when the final person trusts in Christ, at which point God removes this company to heaven with the so-called Rapture. The Rapture is further symbolized by the cutting off of the wild branches (Rom.11:22-24).

**Acts 28:28:** The fullness of the Gentiles refers to the number of believing Gentiles (wild olive branches) it takes to provoke unbelieving Jews (natural branches broken off) to come to faith in their Messiah (thus being restored to the olive tree and stimulating it to bear fruit). It is important to know that when too many wild branches are grafted into an olive tree, the entire tree turns wild, producing bitter, useless fruit. *That the number of Gentiles coming to salvation in Acts is a limited one precludes the idea that Paul's ministry in Acts is a widespread crusade directed toward the Gentiles for the purpose of forming the church (ekklesia), the body of Christ.*

Taking together the points made here, the view of the olive tree held by Acts 28:28 is the one supported by Scripture. As a test, compare the Gentiles during the Acts period, who are in a subservient role to Israel (Rom 11:18), with the Gentiles in Ephesians, who are on equal footing with the Jews, not subservient; they are fellow heirs, not subordinates (Eph. 3:6). The Gentiles in Ephesians cannot possibly be the same company of believers we see in Acts. The Gentiles in Acts are called out to serve a Kingdom purpose for God. The Gentiles in Ephesians belong to God's new company of believers during His new Dispensation of Grace, which begins, not at Acts 9 or 13, but at Acts 28:28.

We conclude that, lacking support from Scripture, those who hold to the Mid-Acts interpretation of the good olive tree find themselves precariously out on a limb.