

Session 11: The Olive Tree

Romans 10-11 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group watches Paul finish the argument chapter 9 began: salvation is as near as a confessing mouth and a believing heart, offered to "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord"; faith comes by hearing, and hearing needs someone sent; God has not rejected his people, whose gifts and call are irrevocable; and the olive tree gives the whole letter its final picture of grace: branches broken for unbelief, wild shoots grafted by faith, warned against boasting, standing only by continuing, with mercy upon all as the destination.

Catholic Touchstone. Three Catholic teachings stand on tonight's chapters: the Church's irrevocable bond with the Jewish people (CCC 839, quoting 11:29); the necessity of sent preachers, which is the logic of apostolic mission (10:14-15); and the true resolution of the assurance question: real confidence and real conditions in one tree, "provided you continue in his kindness" (11:22), which is why the Church teaches that faith is a priceless gift that can be lost (CCC 162) while anchoring hope in God who never revokes his call.

What You Need to Know

Chapter 10 opens where chapter 9 opened, in Paul's heart: "my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (10:1). Israel's zeal is real but unenlightened, seeking to establish its own righteousness rather than submit to God's (10:2-3). Then the hinge: "Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified" (10:4). Be precise with your group: the Greek telos can mean goal and fulfillment as well as termination, and most Catholic interpreters hear the former here: Christ as what the law was always driving toward. And righteousness by faith is near, not up in heaven or across the sea (10:6-8, reworking Deut 30, the same chapter that gave this study heart-circumcision): as near as this: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). Lips and heart, creed and faith, the whole person: your group has heard this anthropology since 1:5.

Then the chain of sending (10:13-17): calling requires believing, believing requires hearing, hearing requires preaching, preaching requires being sent, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" (10:15, quoting Isa 52:7). Faith comes by hearing (10:17): the faith necessarily includes a proclaimed message, and a message needs messengers with a mission. Notice the ecclesiology hiding in the logic: no one sends himself; and the logic points toward what the Church calls apostolicity, a structure of sending the rest of the New Testament fills out. And notice whom "every one" includes: the quotation under 10:13 is tonight's first discovery, and what the group finds there about the word "Lord" is one of the New Testament's quietest, largest claims about who Jesus is.

Chapter 11 answers the question all this raises: "has God rejected his people? By no means!" (11:1). Paul's proofs: himself, an Israelite; the remnant principle, discovered tonight in Elijah's cave (11:2-5); and the remnant is "chosen by grace... otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (11:5-6). Israel's stumble is neither total nor final: it has opened the door to the Gentiles, and their inclusion is designed to make Israel jealous unto salvation (11:11-14). Then the tree (11:16-24): natural branches broken off "because of their unbelief"; wild olive shoots grafted in, standing "only through faith"; the double command, "do not become proud, but stand in awe"; the double-edged verse your group has waited two weeks for: "Note then the kindness and the severity of God... God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut

off" (11:22); and the door that never shuts: the broken branches, "if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in" (11:23). The mystery: hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles, "and so all Israel will be saved" (11:25-26): tell your group honestly that the Church has not defined what that clause means and interpreters differ (the mass of Israel at the end; the full remnant through history; the completed people of God); what is fixed is the Catechism's own teaching of an eschatological "full inclusion" (CCC 674) and 11:29, "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable," the sentence the Catechism itself quotes for the Church's bond with the Jewish people (CCC 839). The unit that began with anguish ends with the largest sentence in the letter, "that he may have mercy upon all" (11:32), and dissolves into doxology (11:33-36). Anti-Jewish readings of Romans die in this chapter; make sure they die in your room too.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Joel 2:32. "Every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (10:13) quotes Joel, where the name called upon is the LORD, the divine name itself. Paul applies the verse to calling on Jesus. The group finds the source and draws the conclusion themselves; guard it, it is the session's quiet thunderclap.

1 Kings 19:10-18. Paul's remnant argument (11:2-5) retells Elijah's despair in the cave and God's answer: "I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal" (1 Kgs 19:18). When the prophet counted one faithful Israelite, God counted seven thousand. A discovery passage; keep it back.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II

In 1986, St. John Paul II crossed the Tiber to the Great Synagogue of Rome, the first pope in memory to enter it, and said to the Jewish community: "You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers." The sentence is Romans 11 spoken with a living voice: the root carries the branches, not the branches the root (11:18), and the gifts and call of God are irrevocable (11:29). What Paul argued in the first century against Gentile boasting, a pope enacted in the twentieth against centuries of it.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

When crusade fervor in the twelfth century turned murderous toward Jewish communities along the Rhine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the most influential churchman of his age, wrote and rode against it, insisting in his letters that the Jews are not to be persecuted or killed, and insisting that their preservation belongs to God's plan and the promises are not revoked. Where the mob read the Gospel with a sword, St. Bernard stood in the road with Romans 11's whole spirit. The olive tree has, at times, needed defending with more than exegesis.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

From India in 1544, St. Francis Xavier wrote the letter the Church still reads in her Office on his feast: multitudes there fail to become Christians, he says, for one reason only, that there is no one to make them Christians; and he confesses the urge to go through the universities of Europe crying out like a madman to the learned, telling them how many souls are missing glory for want of someone sent. It is Romans 10:14-15 turned into a vocation crisis on paper: how are they to hear without a preacher, and how can men preach unless they are sent? Every missionary impulse in the Church's history is that paragraph catching

fire.

Catechism Connection

CCC 839. The Church's teaching on the Jewish people, built from tonight's text: theirs remain "the sonship, the glory, the covenants" (Rom 9:4-5 is quoted), and "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (11:29, quoted). The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant.

CCC 674. The Catechism reads 11:20-26 eschatologically: the glorious Messiah's coming is joined to his recognition by "all Israel," whose "full inclusion" will follow the full number of the Gentiles. The end of the story runs through the natural branches.

CCC 162. The olive tree's warning in catechetical form: "Faith is an entirely free gift... We can lose this priceless gift," which is why we must persevere, nourish faith, and ask for its increase. Kindness and severity, gift and vigilance, exactly as 11:22 holds them.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Has God's word failed: RESOLVES tonight. Planted at 3:1-8 ("Let God be true"), reopened at 9:6, answered at 11:1-2, 11:29, and 11:32. Name the eight-week arc once, plainly.

Assurance tension: RESOLVES tonight. Promised in Sessions 9 and 10; 11:20-23 is the payoff. Run it inside the steelman so the group feels it answer the question they have carried.

Boasting thread: RESOLVES tonight. 3:27 excluded it, 4:2 tested it, 11:18-20 buries it: "do not boast over the branches... stand in awe." One sentence.

To the Jew first: RESOLVES tonight. The ordering of 1:16 finishes as irrevocable gifts and full inclusion. After tonight, only the title inclusio remains unresolved; Session 15 harvests it. Do not mention the inclusio.

Session Goals

1. The group can recite 10:9 and explain nearness: confession and faith, lips and heart.
2. The group discovers Joel 2:32 and can state what 10:13 quietly claims about Jesus, and discovers Elijah's seven thousand behind the remnant.
3. The group can walk the olive tree: why branches were broken, how wild shoots stand, what "provided you continue" requires, and that regrafting is always possible.
4. The group can state the Church's teaching on the Jewish people in one sentence (11:29; CCC 839) and reject every anti-Jewish reading of Romans explicitly.

Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 12 min
- Build questions 1-2 with the Joel discovery: 24 min

- Build questions 3-4 with the Elijah discovery and the olive tree: 24 min
- Steelman chain: 15 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer: 15 min

If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts: drop the Dig Deeper box, and compress 10:1-8 to a two-sentence bridge (zeal without knowledge; the word is near). Never cut the Joel discovery, the olive tree, or the steelman answer.

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Opening Prayer

Father, your word is near us, on our lips and in our hearts. Tonight, teach us the tree we grew on: the root that carries us, the kindness that holds us, the awe that keeps us. Give us Paul's ache for those outside, and let your mercy have the last word here, as it has in your letter. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

1. Who first told you the gospel, and who sent or formed them? Trace the chain back as far as you can.
2. Have you ever been welcomed into something you had no claim on: a family, a team, a country, a table? What did the welcome make you feel toward those who belonged first?

Build

Read Romans 10:1-13 aloud.

1. How near is salvation, according to 10:8-10, and what two organs does it involve? Why both, and not just one?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (10:8): "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). Heart and lips together: Paul will not let faith stay a private opinion, nor confession become mere performance. Paul requires the whole person, interior conviction becoming public confession, which is this study's oldest theme wearing its simplest clothes: faith that engages the will and shows itself. Note also what the confession is: Jesus is Lord, the primal Christian creed; when the aged Polycarp was ordered to say "Caesar is Lord," he went to the fire rather than transfer the title (Martyrdom of Polycarp 8). The next discovery weighs the middle word.

Discovery moment. Say: "Verse 13 seals the promise with a quotation: 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.' Paul is quoting a prophet, a short book, in a passage about the great day of the Lord. Find it, and when you do, look carefully at which name is being called upon in the original." Hint if needed: the prophet's book comes right after Hosea.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Joel 2:32: "all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered," where "the Lord" renders the divine name itself, the name of the God of Israel. Paul takes Joel's promise about calling on the LORD and applies it, without a flicker of hesitation, to calling on Jesus (the whole context of 10:9-13 is confessing Jesus as Lord). Let the group say what that means: a first-century Pharisee, trained his whole life in the difference between God and everything else, has placed Jesus on the divine side of that line as the natural reading of Scripture. The divinity of Christ is not a fourth-century invention; it is sitting quietly inside a quotation in

Romans 10, and your group just found it with their own hands.

2. Walk the chain of 10:14-17 backwards: saved, calling, believing, hearing, preaching, sent. Which link does the modern world assume away, and what does the chain imply about how God has chosen to save?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The last one: sent. Calling needs faith, faith needs hearing, hearing needs a preacher, "and how can men preach unless they are sent?" (10:15). No one commissions himself; behind every hearer stands a speaker, and behind every legitimate speaker, a sending, which is why the Church is apostolic (from apostolos, one sent) in her very structure and why "faith comes from what is heard" (10:17). Two implications for your group: first, gratitude with a genealogy: everyone's faith arrived through a chain of sent people reaching back to an upper room; second, obligation: the chain does not end at us unless we end it. Somewhere, someone's hearing is waiting on someone's going, which was unbearable to at least one saint your Take-Home will introduce.

Read Romans 11:1-10 aloud.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul answers 'has God rejected his people?' with a story about a prophet hiding in a cave, certain he was the only faithful one left. Find God's answer to Elijah, near the end of 1 Kings 19, and note the number."

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

1 Kings 19:18: "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal." Elijah counted one; God counted seven thousand. "So too at the present time," Paul concludes, "there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (11:5), and he closes the loophole immediately: "if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (11:6). Two comforts here. God's fidelity does not require majorities; it never has. And the remnant is not the self-selected spiritual elite; it is grace's roll call, which no one on it earned. Beware the Elijah temptation in your own parish life: the certainty that you are the last faithful one is usually despair doing arithmetic, and God's count is always higher.

3. Read Romans 11:16-24 aloud, and someone sketch the tree as we go: root, natural branches, broken branches, wild shoots. Then answer from the text: why were branches broken? How do the grafted stand? And what do verses 22-23 say can still happen, in both directions?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The root is best read as the patriarchs and the promises (11:16, 28), ultimately grounded in God's own covenant fidelity; the natural branches, Israel; the broken ones, broken "because of their unbelief" (11:20), the reason Paul names; the wild shoots, believing Gentiles, grafted "contrary to nature" (11:24) into a tree they did not plant, nourished by a root they did not grow (11:17-18). How the grafted stand: "you stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe" (11:20). And both directions remain live: "God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off" (11:22), and the broken, "if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again" (11:23). Grafted-in is real union, and it is union sustained by continuing

faith, not by tenure. Hold the tree in view; the steelman is about to climb it.

Steelman: Were the Broken Branches Ever Really Attached?

Build it at full strength. Say to the group: "Two weeks ago the eternal-security case stood on chapter 8, and we promised it an answer at the olive tree. Tonight, hear its best response to the tree itself, and it is a serious one. The Reformed reading says: the warnings are real, but they are the means by which God preserves his elect, who always heed them; and those finally cut off were never truly, savingly attached, branches by profession and appearance only. And in its strongest, covenantal form: the wild shoot is corporate, the visible Gentile community as a body, so genuine covenant attachment need not equal each individual's saving union. Scripture itself seems to say so elsewhere: 'they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us' (1 Jn 2:19). So the tree threatens, the elect tremble and persevere, the merely nominal fall away, and no one truly justified is ever lost. Doesn't that harmonize the warnings with the golden chain?" Give it its full due; it is the strongest form of the position. Then press, from the tree itself.

4. Press: Stay inside the passage. Were the natural branches genuinely attached to the root? (Check 9:4-5.) Are the wild shoots addressed as true believers or as possible fakes? (Check 11:20.) And what does 11:23 do to the claim that cut off proves never attached?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The natural branches genuinely belonged to the tree, corporately and covenantally: "to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (9:4-5); real branches, really broken, "because of their unbelief" (11:20), a cause located in them, not a status revealed about them. (And renaming the union corporate does not make the severing unreal: real covenant membership cut off for unbelief is exactly the Catholic claim.) The wild shoots are addressed precisely as standing believers: "you stand fast only through faith" (11:20): Paul warns people whose present faith he affirms that continuing is required ("provided you continue," 11:22). A warning addressed to real believers about a real possibility cannot be reclassified as a warning about fakes without rewriting the sentence. And 11:23 dismantles the last plank: the cut-off can be grafted in again, so being cut off does not prove one was never attached; the tree runs on living faith, and the Church teaches plainly that this priceless gift can be lost and recovered (CCC 162). Now give the Catholic synthesis at full strength, because it keeps everything: chapter 8 stands untouched, nothing external can sever us, God's call is irrevocable on his side (11:29), and confidence is right; chapter 11 stands untouched, the branch can withdraw by unbelief, so presumption is wrong; and the two chapters were never enemies, because hope, the virtue between despair and presumption, is exactly the posture of a branch: resting its whole weight on the root, and continuing. (As Jesus put the same picture: every branch in him that bears no fruit is taken away, Jn 15:2.) On 1 John 2:19: it truly describes some departures, especially the antichrist-teachers John meant; it is a description of one kind of falling, not a law covering every branch. And take the means-of-perseverance account seriously on its own terms: warnings preserve only by warning of something real for the one warned; a danger no branch could ever meet moves no one, and Paul aims this one at believers he says are standing. Trent adds the honest last note: absent a special revelation, none of us has absolute certainty of our own perseverance, which is why the Church prays for it daily and why 11:20's "stand in awe" is permanent posture, not a phase.

DIG DEEPER

Mercy upon all (11:32) and the doxology. The three hardest chapters in Paul end with his largest sentence: "God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all," and then argument gives way to worship: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!... For from him and through him and to him are all things" (11:33, 36). Notice the order of operations: Paul does not explain the mystery and then praise; he praises because the mystery exceeded him. "How unsearchable are his judgments" is the apostle's own verdict on the material your group has wrestled for three weeks, which means finishing with unanswered questions is not failure; it is fidelity to the text's own ending. The chapter teaches a posture: argue honestly as far as the light goes, then sing.

Send

1. You are a wild branch on borrowed root. Where has Christian belonging made you proud rather than awed, and what would "stand in awe" look like this week?
2. The chain of 10:14-15 does not end at you unless you end it. Whose hearing might be waiting on your going or your words?

Live It This Week

- Thank, in person or in writing, one living link in your chain of hearing: the person who preached, taught, or handed the faith to you.
- Pray daily for the Jewish people, the natural branches, with Paul's own words: that they may be saved (10:1), and with his reverence: the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable (11:29).
- Take one deliberate step of "continuing in his kindness" (11:22) this week: return to Confession, restart a dropped prayer habit, or reconcile with someone, and name it to yourself as remaining in the tree.

Memory Verse

"Because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Romans 10:9 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, gardener of the olive tree, thank you for grafting us in, contrary to nature, by sheer kindness. Keep us from boasting over the branches; keep us standing in awe; keep us continuing. Bring home the natural branches, and make of one tree one people, until your mercy is upon all. From him and through him and to him are all things: to him be glory for ever. Amen.

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Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order

- Romans 10:1-13 (read aloud: zeal without knowledge; Christ the telos of the law; near word; confess and believe; every one who calls)
- Joel 2:32 (discovery passage: calling on the name of the LORD; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 10:14-17 (the chain of sending; beautiful feet, Isa 52:7; faith comes by hearing)
- Romans 11:1-10 (read aloud: has God rejected his people?; Elijah; remnant by grace)
- 1 Kings 19:10-18 (discovery passage: the seven thousand; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 11:16-24 (read aloud with the tree sketched: broken for unbelief; stand by faith; kindness and severity; regrafting; cf. Rom 9:4-5, Jn 15:2)
- 1 John 2:19 (steelman text, cited within the press)
- Romans 11:25-36 (Dig Deeper: the mystery; all Israel; irrevocable gifts; mercy upon all; doxology)
- CCC 839, 674, 162 (Catechism Connection)
- Memory verse: Romans 10:9