

## Who Could Be Cut Off from Christ in Romans 11:22?

*16 For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. 17 And if some of the branches were broken off, 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, 18 do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. 22 Therefore consider the goodness and the severity of God: on those who fell, severity, but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? [emphasis added]*

This passage, especially verse 22, raises the questions, who is the apostle Paul addressing?, what does it mean to be "cut off"?, and what is the significance of the condition "if you continue in His goodness"? It could be misconstrued that Paul is talking to individual Christians who can be cut off from their salvation if they do not continue to live faithfully.

### Who is Paul addressing?

In this epistle, Paul writes to all the believers in Rome (1:7), which undoubtedly includes both Jews and Gentiles. In chapters 9-11 Paul explains Israel's past, present, and future conditions. In chapter 11, he corrects the notion that Israel's unbelief led to their total rejection (v. 1), an incorrect conclusion that could be drawn from the fact that the Jews are temporarily judicially blinded and Paul has turned his ministry toward the Gentiles (vv. 7-8; cf. Acts 28:17-28) calling himself an "apostle to the Gentiles" (v. 13). He declares explicitly those he is addressing: "For I speak to you Gentiles" (v. 13a). In verses 17-24 he clearly differentiates the two groups (Jews and Gentiles) by addressing the Gentiles as one group with the singular pronoun "you" (Greek *su*).

### What does it mean to be "cut off"?

In the passage, Paul uses the illustration of a tree's root and branches. Just as a holy source ("the firstfruit") determines the holiness of what follows ("the lump"), so it is true of a tree's root and branches (v. 16). The root evidently represents Abraham and the patriarchs as the source of the Jewish nation as well as God's covenant promises that set them aside as holy. In the situation at Paul's time, there is a faithful remnant of Jews (v. 5), but some of the natural branches are broken off (unbelieving Jews) and wild branches are grafted in (believing Gentiles; vv. 17-18). Paul's sobering reminder is that the Jews are cut off because they do not believe in the Messiah, Jesus, and the Gentiles are grafted in because of their faith in Christ (vv. 19-20a). This is not a reason for the Gentiles to boast, but to be humbled by God's grace toward them and to be reverent (v. 20b), because God can also cut off the Gentiles from His blessings (v. 21). After all, the Gentiles are only blessed because God first gave the promises to Israel: "For salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

## The significance of the condition “if you continue in His goodness”

Verse 22 comes as an exhortation to the Gentiles in Rome to keep in mind both God’s goodness and His severity. He was severe in his temporary judgment of blinding the Jews and He can be severe with the Gentiles if they do not continue to respond to God’s goodness in Christ. The promise of remaining in God’s blessings or being cut off is to the Gentiles as a whole (again, the singular “you” is used), not individual Gentile believers or individual believers at all. To be clear, Paul is not speaking of individual justification, but God’s posture toward a group of people, the Jews or Gentiles.

Paul wants the Gentiles to know that Israel has been cast aside or set aside (v. 15, the noun, *apobolē*, is from the verb, *apoballō*, throw away, shed, remove), not totally rejected as refuted by Paul in verse 1 (compare the different verb used in verse 1, *apōsato* from *apōtheō*, to reject or repudiate). Just as Israel’s judgment is not permanent, neither is the blessing currently enjoyed by the Gentiles. If Israel turns to Jesus Christ in faith they can be restored, because it is more natural for a natural branch (the Jews) to be restored to its cultivated source than for a wild branch (the Gentiles) to be grafted in (vv. 23-24). Indeed, Israel is only temporarily cut off, and God will one day restore them (vv. 25-27). It is clear from this promise that the church has not taken Israel’s place, but Israel maintains a key role in God’s plan. The Gentiles “were grafted in among them” (the Jews), not *in place of* them. (v. 17). Gentiles must therefore continue to respond positively and humbly to God’s kindness toward them in Christ lest God also cut them off from the blessings originally promised to Israel (v. 21).

## Conclusion

Without a clear understanding of the context of this passage, one could conclude that God might cut off a Christian from Christ or take away that person’s salvation. But the apostle Paul is speaking to the Gentiles in the Roman church about the Jews and the Gentiles as two groups. Because of Israel’s unbelief, their privileged blessings have been temporarily removed and the Gentiles are now in the place of blessing. But Gentiles can also lose their standing through unbelief. It is important that Gentile believers appreciate this magnanimous grace of God extended to them in His gift of salvation through Jesus Christ by believing in Him and living reverently for Him. God’s grace should humble us, not make us proud. Neither Jew nor Gentile should ever take God’s grace for granted.