

The Source of Our Strength

Romans 11:24

by Ernest O'Neill

Would you take a Bible, loved ones, and turn to Romans 11:24 "For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree." I could repeat it in our own words and you could catch it very clearly. Paul says there are two olive trees: one a cultivated one the other a wild one. There are branches on the cultivated tree that aren't bearing fruit, so the gardener cuts them off. Then he takes some of the branches out of the wild tree and grafts them into the cultivated tree. Then Paul says now if the gardener -- God -- was able to do a double miracle for the branches in the wild tree; if he was able to cut them out of the wild tree and graft them into the cultivated tree — then surely he can take some of the branches that he originally cut out of the cultivated tree and graft them back into that tree.

Or say you have two families living next door to each other. One family brings up the children on good, wholesome food that the body was designed to work best on. The other family brings up the children on junk food and fats of all kinds. As they grow older and go to college, these children learn that junk food is the worst thing they could have, and they begin to learn to eat properly. The first children begin to eat junk food in their teen-age years. Do you see that if you can bring the children to eat good food who never knew good food when they were children, it is certainly easy to call these other children back to what they originally knew as children? That's what Paul is saying: if you can call people to a truth that they never knew, then you can certainly call people back to the truth that they once knew. That is what he is saying about the Jews: the Jews are the only people on the earth who from their very beginnings as a nation lived the way we were all meant to live. That is they lived depending on God for their safety and self-worth; but they stopped living that way. Paul says, "Surely God can call them back and will bring some of them back to live dependent on God, especially because in the meantime he has called many of us to that kind of life who never knew it in the past." So that's it, loved ones. That is really what God is saying.

I think often we don't realize this verse is the end of a paragraph that deals with one main subject and maybe you'd look at it. That paragraph begins in verse 17 and is concerned with the analogy between the branches of olive trees and people who put their faith in God and people who put their faith in themselves. Now you and I have a tendency to take that analogy rather casually: we say, "Yes, Paul is saying that those who put their faith in themselves are the bad guys who wear the black hats, and those who put their faith in God are the good guys who wear the white hats. The good guys are the cultivated trees and the bad guys who put their faith in themselves are the wild olive trees." But that is about as far as we go.

Loved ones, God's Word is not as casual as that; God's Word means everything that it says. Jesus said not a dot or a comma will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Moreover, there are verses in this paragraph that imply that an intelligent man like Paul is really stretching a metaphor very far at times, if all it is, is a metaphor. If the only meaning of a cultivated olive tree and a wild olive tree is that one is good and one is bad, then Paul is certainly dragging it out excessively; he puts an awful lot of emphasis on grafting and being broken if all he is at here is an illustration of good and bad; white hats and black hats. In fact, the whole paragraph indicated it is rather deeper than that. Over the past few weeks we have seen that God has dealt a

long time with people who put their faith in him, or who put their faith in themselves, in terms of an organism like trees. As far back as the early days of creation he said, "There is a tree of life and there is a tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Then through the days of the Jewish wilderness times and exile, people like Jeremiah continued to use that language, saying, "The Lord has said to you, 'You, Israel, are a green olive tree.'" Then near the end of Revelations there is talk about a tree of life. So God has always talked about putting faith in yourself or putting faith in him in terms of an organism like a tree.

The question is: what are the two trees? Are they just two ways of living life? Well, it was never very clear what the trees were; whether they were just two theories -- or philosophies of life -- until about 28 A.D. At that time Jesus, God's Son said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." (John 15:5) Immediately it became clear to all of us that these two trees did not just represent two ways of living life; they didn't just represent two philosophies or theories; they didn't just illustrate immorality and morality or a conservative attitude to life or a liberal attitude to life. They represented two powers, two energies, two sources of strength. The way you lived depended on which tree you tapped into. There are two strengths or powers into which we can go for our life's strength -- that is what God is saying in this paragraph. Actually there is only one energy; this eternal Christ-life that runs through all the centuries. The other life is only an appearance of life that comes from counterfeiting the results of real life by manipulation and deception. But you can live either way.

Now it was that kind of pseudo-power that Abraham tapped into in that incident with his wife. His wife was obviously quite beautiful, and when Abraham found himself coming into Egypt because of the famine in his own land, he suddenly realized that Pharaoh and the Egyptians may well have wanted to kill him in order to get hold of his wife. So he said to Sarah, "Don't tell them you are my wife -- tell them you are my sister." Maybe you would look at the immediate result in Genesis 12:15-16. "And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels." It seemed that by his lying and deception Abraham apparently tapped in to some power.

Loved ones you and I have done the same thing a thousand times: we have come into tight situations where we wanted to make a good impression for ourselves -- we wanted people to think better of us than they really ought to. Or we came into a situation where we didn't want to face the confrontation and we did the same as Abraham; the lie just flips off like that! We produce it hardly without thinking. You know how often it has seemed that we have tapped into some energy that brings about an immediate improvement in the situation, isn't that right? We tell a little white lie -- we deceive -- and it seems that some energy begins to work that brings about an immediate improvement to the situation. The fact is it isn't an improvement at all; it is a counterfeiting of the results that Christ's energy-power would bring if we went his way. It is a counterfeiting of those results by the world system and by the power of evil that runs this world system. But actually it doesn't last any longer than Abraham's did. Look at the next few verses; verse 17: "But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sar'ai, Abram's wife." So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"

In other words, we were made to operate only with Christ's life -- that's the only real energy in this world -- everything else is a counterfeit of that. The world is set up so that immediately we tap into the counterfeit, the real energy of Christ's life gets going, and in that case, afflicted Pharaoh with plagues. In our case, we tell the lie, and then they say something and then you have to

draw the lie out a little further. They build something on that and then they tell some other person about the lie that you told them, not knowing it was a lie. Then the other person comes to you and makes a comment about it, and you have to explain the lie a little further. Before you know it, you have started to build up a whole facade about yourself that is far from what really happened. Then it is not long before the energy of Christ's life begins to react against the guilt in your conscience and before you know it, "through headaches and worry, vaguely life leaks away." You build more and more facades with the lies and deceptions until you find yourself in a Watergate situation where the whole of your life begins to be a lie.

Of course it stops the energy that moves through every little five-year-old who lives gaily for the moment -- and that is the way we were meant to live. We were meant to live properly in this present moment; we were meant to be "now" people who don't have a whole facade of lies and deceptions and manipulation to try to maintain to hold the tenuous fabric of our lives together and keep the house of cards from blowing away. We weren't meant to live that way; we were meant to live in gay abandon and in bright delight in the present moment like every five-year-old. But we tap into this other life because we are absolutely convinced we have only ourselves to depend on. "If the boss finds out what I did wrong, nobody else will help me; I have to help myself. If these few friends that I have see me as I really am they will have no time for me so I've only myself to depend on." It is that faith in ourselves and in our ability to somehow make life go right that gets us to tap into this counterfeit life of the world system. Of course it is only a counterfeit life; it doesn't actually bring about anything. It often brings about counterfeit results that reinforce our misconception that there is a power that we got hold of. Loved ones that is what runs through all the bluff psychology books. The good psychology books talk about the real dynamics of personal relationships in God, but the bluff "pop" ones talk about this kind of manipulation of each other that is simply tapping into a life that will disappear like a soap bubble.

It contrasts completely with the experience of Abraham that is recounted in Genesis 13. Abraham had a nephew called Lot, and they were having trouble with their herdsmen because they were both grazing the same land. Abraham was really the senior guy and he had the right to choose the land he wanted, but instead of acting the way he did previously, he decided that he would let the Spirit of Christ work through him. Genesis 13:8: "Then Abram said to Lot 'Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand then I will go to the left.'" Loved ones that is the only way to peace; if you keep plowing out your own right and try to guard yourself, the only way you can do it is by manipulation and deception. The only life you tap into is a counterfeit life of the world system that isn't a life or energy at all. But there is within you this attitude of Jesus. There is! Just because you are human God has planted in you the seeds of his Son. You know so often you've had a rising inside you that says, "Well, I'll let him have the choice. 'Which do you want for your vacation? You take it and I'll take the other one.'" When you let that Spirit of Jesus' selfless life operate through you, his energy is immediately released to effect changes in your circumstances.

Now do you want the proof of it? Look at Genesis 13:10: "And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar." He took the good land and it appeared that the guy who put his faith in himself was winning out. There was again that old counterfeit appearance of an immediate improvement in the circumstances. But read the next line. Lot ended up in the same land where Sodom and Gomorrah were located. Verse 13 explains it: "Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord." Jesus knows things about your situation that you don't know. This Spirit of Christ made the

world and he made you, and he knows things about your future and your vocation. He knows things about your marital future that none of us know. His energy and life is released every time you put your faith in him and in his ability to change things and bring things about. Loved ones, you actually do choose to live one way or the other; you either live the old opportunist's life by putting your faith in yourself or in others, or in the fallout of circumstances, and that's what most of us do. Most of us run our lives by what we call the "lucky" things that happen to us. It is madness! Since this world is in the control of the evil one, there is only one being that controls the general run of events in this world.

Yet, if you decide to live your life by putting your faith in yourself or in other people or the sequence of events and circumstances, you will tap into a counterfeit world energy that gives an appearance of temporary improvement, but actually will eventually be undermined by the real Christ-energy that is working all the time to encourage loved ones to trust Jesus and to trust God. If you begin to realize that there is a real tree of life, there is a Christ-energy that is still able to heal withered flesh, there is a Christ-energy that is still able to guide your life and guard it and effect change in your circumstances and touch the hearts of bosses and colleagues and actually even free money so that it is available -- then once you do that, you tap into the real energy behind this world.

I would ask you: how are you living? One of the bases of Christ's energy and power in a person is that that person has as the ruling passion of their lives the same purpose as Jesus. Jesus' purpose is to bring as many people into relationship with his Father as he can, because he knows this world is going to be burned up very soon. So the main purpose of his life is to draw others into the same loving relationship with his Father as he has. That becomes the ruling passion of the life of a person who is grafted into Jesus. Is your life dominated by your preoccupation with the house of your choice, the career of your choice, the wife of your choice, the vacation of your choice, the future of your choice? You know it is not hard to tell: if your life is dominated by that kind of attitude to life then you are like Lot. "I want the best land, I want the best house, and I want the best future." Or is your life dominated, like Paul's was, with bringing as many people into a love relationship with our Creator as we possibly can?

Paul heads out from Macedonia to Rome, if that is the best spot, even though it means prison. Abraham left Haran not knowing where he was to go. They went because they were set on the same purpose as Jesus. Is your attitude "America is the best country in the world—highest salary, best living conditions, greatest amount of freedom, best chocolate—chip ice cream, best hamburgers -- this is the best place for me to live"? If that's it, you'll tap into that old, counterfeit life of the world system, and you will eke out your life in a series of frustrating half—successful situations. But if you will say, "Lord Jesus, I believe you are the only real energy in this world and I intend to be grafted into you by setting my life to move in the same direction as yours. Where you want me, that's where I'll live. I don't particularly want to be a preacher or a missionary, but wherever you want me to live and do my job, that I'll do, Whatever job you want me to do, that I'll do." Immediately you set out to your Macedonia or Rome or Canaan, whether it is actually at home or abroad; when you begin to look from God's angle at the world and at your life and you begin to determine to do what he would want you to do, you tap into that energy of Christ's life. You may hit cancer and everything there is to hit, but you'll have a power and a supernatural strength that is not your own coming right through the middle of those chaotic circumstances and enabling you to continue to exist in joy in situations that you could never have thought of. That's it! There is really only one energy. The bluff is that we think it is a choice of being dependent or independent. it isn't! That is Satan's bluff. We were made to be dependent creatures. It is simply

-- what power do you depend on? There is only one real power.

When you say, "I'm independent," actually you end up being most dependent. You end up being chained and fettered to the circumstances and the opinions of other people. You become tied by a mystical chain to this world and this society. You become a half man or a half woman. Actually it is only when you say, "Sure, I was made to be dependent; dependent on a dear Father who is most anxious to preserve my free will above everything else, because he wants my free love." Once you say that, you tap into the energy without which it is impossible to live this life right. I'd ask you: which way are you living? Which tree are you grafted into? Where do you get the energy for your life? If you don't get it from Jesus, then all you're involved in doing is pretending that there is energy through your manipulations and your deception.

It just came home to me strongly how often I lied in my life. We are all the same; we are afraid -- we have only our own strength and resources and we don't see how we will manage it, so we lie. Do you see that there is an exhilaration that comes into your heart the first time, instead of lying, you say, "Lord Jesus, I've never seen your energy at work, but I'm going to go that way. I'm going to risk it." Then you speak the truth and say, "I didn't do the assignment. I apologize, but I did not do it." Or "I made the mistake in the calculations. It was my fault." Or "No, I wasn't there" or "I can't do it."

There is nothing like the exhilaration that comes when Jesus pumps his energy and life into you because you let his truthful Spirit flow through you. I pray that somebody here, that has never worked that way before because they thought there was nothing going for them, will do it this week. It ends up in a delightful life with no worry and no care.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, I would pray for my dear friends here who have listened to this. I pray especially for anyone who, like me, was feeling very much on their own and feeling that if they didn't manipulate it and manage it, it just wouldn't happen. Lord I pray that you'll give them enough encouragement this morning to out on a limb to give up lying and deception and to stop trusting in themselves and stop trusting in circumstances and other people; to instead start turning to you, and putting their trust in you. Lord Jesus, I pray that you will find great satisfaction in all of us this coming week and that they'll be hundreds of hopeless situations that will come about because of our incompetence that you'll be able to pump your energy and life into to transform, because we are putting our faith in you and we are grafted into that cultivated olive tree.

Lord we pray that we'll be able to live that way this very afternoon, for your glory.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen.