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Our Family Tree

We hear this Scripture quoted all the time: “*The truth shall make you free.*” Allow me to let you in on a little secret: it’s *not* true. I know many of you are shocked right now. You may be thinking, *How can Pastor Larry say that? It’s in the Bible. Jesus Himself said it. I’ve heard it taught time and time again: “The truth shall make you free.”*

I’m here to tell you, “No, it will not.” Why? It won’t because that’s not what the Bible says. Let’s look at this passage together:

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”
(John 8:31–32)

Once again, some of you are now thinking, *Don’t you see, Pastor Larry? It’s right there in front of you: “The truth shall make you free.”* But is that really what Jesus was saying? Look again at verse 32. Do you see it? Jesus first said, “*And you shall know the truth.*” This means that you will understand the truth; then, and only then—when you know God’s Word *and* you understand God’s Word—will that truth “*make you free.*” Once we understand God’s concepts, they have the power to set us free. If we remain ignorant of what the Bible says, it remains the truth, but that truth won’t do us much good until we understand it. Let me give you some examples.

Before I met Jesus, I was a drug dealer and an addict. The *truth* was that Jesus came two thousand years ago to forgive me, change me, and love me, but the miracle-working *power* of that truth did me no good until somebody told me about it so I could fully *understand* it. The truths that Jesus died on the cross, that He rose again on the third day, that He was

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the Lamb of God who took away my sins, and that He came to set the captives free were real, but they did not set me free until I *knew* them. Once I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and began to understand those truths, the Word of God jumped off the pages of the Bible and changed from *logos* (the Greek word for written words on a page) to *rhema* (the Greek word for God's Word, alive and working in my spirit). Just as Jesus was the Word of God become flesh, *rhema* is the truth of God's Word made alive for you and me. So many promises of God never come alive for us, His children, because we don't fully *know* and *understand* them.

Water Closets and Hogs

Unfortunately, one of the main reasons people fail to understand truth has to do with the many differences and complexities of language. Years ago, Tiz and I moved to Australia to pastor our second church. Soon after moving there, we were visiting a pastor's home, and before we sat down to eat, I asked him, "May I use your bathroom?" He pointed down the hall and said, "Second door on the right." I followed his directions, and, sure enough, there was a sink, a tub, and a shower, but, unfortunately for me, not the item I really needed to use. After a few minutes of frustration, I came out with embarrassment and admitted, "I'm sorry, but I can't find it."

He asked, "What are you looking for?"

I shared my biological need with him, and he said, "Oh, you're not looking for the bathroom; you're looking for the water closet!"

On that day, I learned an important lesson: in Australia, the "water closet" is the toilet and the "bathroom" is literally the room in which you take a bath. Once I understood that truth, it became very useful to me.

Here's another example. Let's say I hand you my wallet and ask, "Would you mind putting this wallet in my *boot*?" How would you interpret that? If you were from Texas, you'd probably put my wallet into my Tony Llama cowboy footwear. On the other hand, if you were from South Africa, you

would most likely toss it into the trunk of my car. The same word is used—even the same spelling—but two totally different meanings are inferred.

You don't have to be from the other side of the globe to find this kind of confusion. If somebody told you, "Pastor Larry was seen riding a thousand-pound *hog*," what would that mean to you? If you were from Arkansas—the Razorback State—you might picture me saddled on the back of a very large animal with a snout. If, however, you were from south St. Louis, like I am, you would probably picture me riding around on a thousand-pound Harley Davidson motorcycle—which would be the truth. Again, the same word is used, but the interpretation is different depending on your upbringing, experience, and culture—and this is for people who live in the same time period! Imagine the difficulties that occur when you introduce different languages, cultures, and a two-thousand-year or more separation of time.

To glean all of God's truth from Scripture, we need to learn to read the Bible not merely from a twenty-first century American or European perspective but also from the perspective of the times and cultures in which it was written—particularly, the Jewish world of first-century Jerusalem and surrounding Israel. Those who wrote the Bible may have spoken Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic, but, for the most part, they thought and reasoned with Jewish mind-sets.

No Longer Gentiles, No Longer Strangers

Let us begin by focusing on an important passage of Scripture. Even though it was written more than two thousand years ago, I believe it remains a prophetic word for us today.

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh; who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands; that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so

as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

(Ephesians 2:11–22)

I know that this is a long passage of Scripture, but let's take a moment to break down these powerful words.

Paul said we were “*once Gentiles*.” This is very important. If you are not of Jewish blood but have asked Jesus Christ to come into your heart and forgive you of your sins, you were *once* a Gentile, but not anymore! *Gentile* in Greek is the word *ethnos*, defined by *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* as “foreign nations not worshipping the true God, pagans.” In addition to the word *Gentile*, the Bible also uses words such as *foreigners*, *strangers*, and *nations*—all referring to those who do not worship the one true God, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God who sent His Son, Jesus, to pay the price for our sins in full so that we could go boldly before Him.

Look at what it says later in this passage: “*Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God*” (verse 19). Paul was referring to us. We were *once* strangers, but *now* we are fellow citizens with the saints—the church—and members of the household of God with Israel.

Redeemed and Reconnected

As a Christian, you have probably heard time and time again that you have been “redeemed by the blood of Jesus.” When we become believers, we

are restored as children of the covenant promises of God through the shed blood of Jesus. Here are just a couple of examples from Scripture:

Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ. (1 Peter 1:18–19)

You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. (Revelation 5:9)

Ephesians 2 makes it clear that without Jesus, we were aliens, strangers, and foreigners—disconnected from God. Now, thanks to our redemption, God has reconnected us to two very important things.

1. We Have Been Adopted into a New Family

First, we are now part of the family of Israel. The apostle Paul had a unique way of explaining this for a first-century audience who was familiar with growing things from the earth:

*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, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. (Romans 11:17–18, emphasis added)*

This is such an important passage for our study that we will be returning to it several more times. For now, however, I want you to see that you and I—non-Jewish Christians—have been “grafted in” to the tree. The branches of that tree are Israel. According to Scripture, we have been adopted—grafted—into the family of Israel by the life and blood of Jesus Christ. Our faith, therefore, is not isolated; it does not exist independently, and it is not to be treated as a “spin-off” religion. We are not spiritual orphans. We belong to a living, spiritual “family tree” that is supported by a common root—Jesus Christ, the Messiah. “Remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.” The Bible makes this clear in both the Old and New Testaments:

In that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. (Isaiah 11:10)

I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star. (Revelation 22:16)

2. We Are Legal Heirs of Abraham's Covenant

Second, now that we have been adopted into the family, we are also connected to the promise God made to His children—His covenant promise.

Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. (Galatians 3:7–9)

Like any child who is adopted into a family, we now have equal rights as legal heirs within that family. In this case, our adoption is all thanks to the shed blood of Jesus. We are now children of the covenant. What covenant? God's covenant with Abraham, who at the time was known as Abram:

Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1–3)

With that, Abram became the first Hebrew. Notice I didn't say Israelite, because at this time, obviously, there was no land of Israel. You might say he became the first Jewish person on the face of the earth. How did this come about?

According to Jewish tradition, Abram grew up working in his father's shop, which sold idols, although he always questioned his father's beliefs.

One day, according to the teaching, young Abram smashed all the idols with a hammer while his father was away and then placed the hammer by one spared idol. When his father returned, Abram blamed the crime on that idol. His father grew upset and claimed that the story was impossible since these idols had no life or power. Abram agreed and asked, “Then why do you worship them?” The teaching suggests that Abram believed the universe to be the work of a single creator and began to share this with others. Of course, this account is from the Jewish Midrash—oral Torah teachings—and not our Scriptures, but the Old Testament does agree that Abram’s family worshipped idols. (See Joshua 24:2.)

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However it happened, young Abram’s faith in one true God was the seed that would become Israel—the children of God. Later, God would say to the nation of Israel,

Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him.
(Isaiah 51:1–2)

Now, some of you may be thinking, *But Pastor Larry, when God said, “Look to Abraham your father,” wasn’t He talking to Israel and not to us?*

It’s true that He was addressing Israel, but it is also true that you and I have been “grafted in.” Let me ask you a question: Are you Christ’s? If your answer is yes, then God says that you are Abraham’s seed. It doesn’t matter if you were born in Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia, North America, South America, or Antarctica—if you are a non-Jewish Christian, you were *once* a Gentile, but now that you’ve been born again, you are no longer a stranger but the seed of Abraham and an heir, according to the promise.

The Olive Tree

In Romans 11, the apostle Paul compares Israel to an olive tree. Now that we understand that the tree we’ve been grafted into is Israel, let’s look

at some biblical and historical features of the olive tree. Throughout this book, I will be referring to the fact that everything God teaches us has both a *physical* side and a *spiritual* side, an *earthly* side and a *heavenly* side. When we look at the features of a *physical* olive tree, we can see the same blessings on the *spiritual* olive tree, Israel.

1. Olive trees outlive most other fruit trees. Likewise, Israel and the Jewish people have outlived all the empires that have enslaved them or tried to destroy them, including the Persian empire, the Babylonian empire, the Ottoman empire, and the Roman empire. They even outlived the Nazi government, the “Thousand Year Reich,” that attempted to annihilate them.

“No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is from Me,” says the LORD. (Isaiah 54:17)

2. The roots of an olive tree are strong and are able to live in all soils. Likewise, throughout history, even though the Jewish people have been scattered about the world among different races and cultures, Judaism has survived and remained intact.

Thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.” (Isaiah 43:1–2)

3. Even in very old olive trees, shoots are able to spring up and reproduce. Despite persecution and dispersment, Judaism has grown and the population of Israel has increased.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. (Psalm 128:3)

4. Even today, olive oil remains a major source of wealth. Likewise, God has continually blessed Israel with provision whenever its people have needed it.

Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper....And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

(Deuteronomy 8:6–9, 18)

5. Olive oil is used as both fuel and food. Likewise, throughout history, Judaism has both sustained and provided for its people.

As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.

(John 6:57)

6. Olive oil is used for anointing and healing. The calling of God to His people is the same: be set apart as a blessing to others.

You shall make from these a holy anointing oil, an ointment compounded according to the art of the perfumer. It shall be a holy anointing oil....And you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: "This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations."

(Exodus 30:25, 31)

So [the apostles] went out and preached that people should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.

(Mark 6:12–13)

It quickly becomes obvious—and exciting—why it is such a blessing to be grafted into the promises and covenant of Israel—God’s olive tree. Remember what God says, throughout the Bible, about Israel and the Jewish people:

1.) They are the apple of God's eye—always have been, always will be.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: "He sent Me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for he who touches you, touches the apple of His eye."
(Zechariah 2:8)

2.) They are a people chosen to be a blessing to the rest of the world.

The Jewish people, and their Promised Land of Israel, were chosen to connect the rest of the world to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God said,

I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.
(Genesis 12:2–3)

The nation of Israel was to be the connection to Jesus, both in His first coming and in His second coming. Let us read what Jesus said in the book of Matthew:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.
(Matthew 5:13–14)

If you've been in an average church for any period of time, you have probably heard these verses read and used in sermons. In most cases, they are used as an encouragement for Christians to be a light in their world. In its historical context, however, when Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth*" (Matthew 5:13) and when He said, "*You are the light of the world*" (verse 14), He was not speaking to Christians. Whom, then, was Jesus reminding to be salt, preserving this earth from rotting away? Whom was He reminding to be a light that would lead people out of darkness?

It's simple: He was speaking to a Jewish audience—the apple of God's eye. There were no Christians at that time. Jesus had not yet died on the cross; He had not yet risen from the grave; He had not yet built His church. At that point in history, there simply was no *us*. Through Jesus Christ, of course, we now have been grafted into the olive tree and connected to the root—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, we are *now* included in this family mission to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

Now that we know our heritage—our spiritual family tree—we can begin to focus on what this means for our lives and our faith, and we can learn how our blended, sometimes dysfunctional family is supposed to live together.

It's simple. We need to build the right kind of house.