

## Chapter Eleven

### Redemption and the Remnant

*Purpose:* The aim of this talk is to approach the basic theme of sin and redemption from an Old Testament base in Israel. So the teaching moves from the election of Israel to the constant disobedience of Israel as a whole and the emergence of a faithful remnant within Israel from whom the Redeemer will come. In this way we will see how God uses the rebellion of his chosen people as the instrument by which he will redeem them and all peoples. The Church of the redeemed then takes its beginning from the believing remnant in Israel.

*Presentation:* This teaching may introduce young people for the first time to the idea that God uses the human worst to produce His best. The teacher should try to evoke the drama that is unfolding throughout the Old Testament. It is a drama in which God is a participant. God's heart is torn. This is not just presenting a history of doctrine, but it involves the revelation of God's father-heart. People need to pray and ask the light of the Holy Spirit to be able to enter into this drama and receive the revelation of the Father's heart.

#### The Disobedience of Israel

It is extraordinary that in the Scriptures, there is so often a major rebellion very soon after God opens up a new phase in his dealings with his people. We know that after the description of the creation of man in Genesis 1 & 2, the story of the original rebellion follows in Genesis 3. But soon after the manifestation of the Lord to Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19 - 24), the people persuade Aaron to fashion the golden calf (Ex. 32). In the desert, through unbelief the majority refuse to take the direct route into Canaan and so they spend forty years in the wilderness instead of two (Num. 14: 33). Immediately after the crossing of the Jordan, there is the rebellion of Achan as Jericho is captured (Joshua 7). In the first generation after the establishment of the kingdom in Jerusalem with David as king, his son Solomon is unfaithful, which is followed by the stubbornness of Rehoboam (see 1 Kings 11 - 12).

But the pattern of Israel's unbelief and rebellion is first seen clearly during the forty years in the desert. Not only do they refuse to go straight into the promised land, but they complain against the leadership of Moses and want to return to Egypt, where they had been slaves. They say "O that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to eat." (Num. 11: 4 - 5). Then Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses (Num. 12: 1). There are tones of jealousy in their complaint: "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Num. 12: 2). Then they refuse to go up to the promised land, but immediately complain in unbelief: "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the LORD bring us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt." (Num. 14: 2 - 3). Then in Numbers 16, we read of the rebellion of Korah and others, who say Moses exalts himself above the people (Num. 16: 3).

Already perhaps the theme of the faithful remnant, the minority who believe, is emerging with Joshua and Caleb alone of those who entered the wilderness being able to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. The promises given to Moses for the people are given to Joshua: "as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake

you.” (Jos. 1: 5). But after Joshua’s death, we are told: “And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them, who did not know the LORD, or the work which he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals” (Judg. 2: 10 - 11). Here is made more clear the battle between authentic worship of the God of Israel and the worship of idols. There now begins a cycle in which Israel turns from God to idols, disaster comes upon them through the attacks of surrounding peoples, the people cry out to God in their suffering and God sends a judge to deliver them; this is repeated in the stories of Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah and Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Samson and finally Samuel. With Samuel, who represents the transition from the time of the Judges to the age of the prophets, a further phase begins.

The people ask Samuel for a king. Samuel sees this as a rejection of the rule of the LORD (1 Sam. 8: 6 - 7). They are tired of the burden of being God’s chosen people, but want to be like everyone else. “now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8: 5). But after the disappointment of Saul, God gives them a king after his own heart, David. **Here we find the pattern of God using the unbelief of the people as a key step in their salvation.** From this king will come the Messiah-Saviour, who will deliver not only Israel, but all peoples from unrighteousness and evil. David’s call leads to the capture of Jerusalem from the Jebusites, and the establishment of Jerusalem-Sion as the city of God and the seat of the Davidic king. From this point there begins to be a major expansion in the promises of the Lord to his people, centred both on the coming king (Messiah or anointed one) and on the city of God.

The establishment of the kingdom of David is followed by the disobedience of Solomon and the division of the kingdom under his son, Rehoboam. Ten tribes are withdrawn from the kingdom of Rehoboam. To Jeroboam, the prophet Ahijah says: “Nevertheless I will not take the whole kingdom out of his [Solomon’s] hand; ... but I will take the kingdom out of his son’s hand, and will give it to you, ten tribes. Yet to his son I will give one tribe, that David my servant may always have a lamp before me in Jerusalem, the city where I have chosen to put my name.” (1 Kings 11: 34, 35 - 36). Already, in a sense, the tribe and kingdom of Judah is a remnant from among the twelve tribes.

In the subsequent history of the two kingdoms, the kings of Israel are repeatedly disobedient following the example of Jeroboam, who established his own cult, his own feasts and his own priesthood (see 1 Kings 12: 26 - 33; 13: 33 - 34). So for their sin the ten northern tribes are defeated by Assyria and taken into exile in the year 721 BCE. But Judah is not much better. In fact, the prophet Ezekiel presents the sin of Judah at the end as worse than the sin of Israel, the northern kingdom (see Ez. 16: 47, 51). So Israel is taken into exile in Babylon, the temple is destroyed and Jerusalem is devastated.

### The Remnant of Israel

Before the downfall of the kingdom of Judah, the great prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah both warn against the coming devastation and give wonderful predictions of subsequent restoration. It is in Isaiah particularly that we find the idea of the **remnant**. The first meaning of remnant seems to have referred to those who will return from Babylon to the land of Israel after the end of the enforced exile. “In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean upon him that smote them, but will lean upon the LORD, the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 10: 20). The remnant are those who remain faithful to the God of Israel. For those who return from the exile chose to do so in faith. More Jews remained in Babylon than returned from the exile.

The remnant is important for understanding God's plan of salvation. The promises are given to the whole people. But it is through the faithful remnant that the witness of Israel to the Messianic promises is carried forward to the next generation. Sometimes the remnant has been misunderstood to mean that only the remnant are saved or that God is withdrawing his promises from the whole people and restricting them to the remnant. No! The remnant carry the promises given to the whole people who remain the chosen people. "In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people" (Is. 28: 5). But it is through the faithful remnant that God will save and deliver the whole. "And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward; for out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors." (Is. 37: 31 - 32).<sup>1</sup>

The remnant is quite small. At the end of Isaiah 6, we read: "And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump." (Is. 6: 13). "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Glean thoroughly as a vine the remnant of Israel" (Jer. 6: 9). But as the faithful ones, the remnant identify fully with the calling of Israel, and in this way become the vehicle that God uses to bring blessing and deliverance to the whole people. The remnant grieve deeply, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, over the unfaithfulness of the majority. We find the repentance prayer of these faithful ones in Ezra 9: 6 - 15; Neh 9: 32 - 37; and Dan 9: 4 - 19, where these faithful men identify with the sins of their people<sup>2</sup>. In line with this, these Israelites never say that we are the faithful remnant.<sup>3</sup> God alone knows the identity of the remnant. So it is quite wrong for groups that have abandoned their previous loyalties to claim to be the faithful remnant. That is a replacement concept of remnant (God has chosen us, the faithful ones, instead of you, the unfaithful), not found anywhere in the Scriptures.

The Messianic prophecies concerning the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" (Is. 11: 1) and the "root of Jesse" (Is. 11: 10) and the "righteous Branch" whom the LORD will raise up for David (Jer. 23: 5 - 6; see also Is. 11: 1) also reflect the remnant idea of God raising up the Saviour and Deliverer in the midst of the people among whom very few are faithful. From all these developments, we can see how the Lord is preparing for the coming redemption and restoration through the remnant of Israel.

### Remnant in the New Testament

In the light of this Old Testament history and the response of Israel, especially the leaders, to Jesus, we can see how there is a faithful remnant in Israel at the time of the coming of Jesus. This remnant is portrayed in the first two chapters of Luke, especially in the persons of Zechariah and Elizabeth, of Joseph and Mary, of Simeon and Anna. But the description Luke gives at the end of chapter 1 portrays a localized milieu of faithful Israelites awaiting the Messianic fulfilment: "And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea; and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?'" (Luke 1: 65 - 66).

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<sup>1</sup> Other remnant passages include: Is. 10: 21 - 22; 11: 11 (referring to return from a second exile?), 16; 37: 4; Jer. 23: 3; 31: 7; 50: 20; Ez. 11: 13; Amos 5: 15; Micah 2: 12; 5: 7 - 8; Zeph. 2: 7, 9; Haggai 1: 14; 2: 2; Zech. 8: 11 - 12.

<sup>2</sup> See also Neh. 1: 6; Jer. 3: 25.

<sup>3</sup> The only places where the writer identifies himself as part of the remnant is in Ezra 9, where the remnant refer to those who have returned from the exile (see Ezra 9: 15)

But as the ministry of Jesus develops, we see the same pattern of unbelief repeated that we saw in the earlier history of Israel. The big crowds that follow Jesus at the start of his ministry fade away, as the opposition of most scribes and Pharisees grows. So by the time Jesus comes to his passion, most of the remaining disciples are overcome with fear, and only Mary, John and two other women are found standing at the foot of the cross (see John 20: 25 - 26). The leaders of Israel have demanded the execution of Jesus as a blasphemer and troublemaker. This is the culmination of the sins of rebellion and rejection through Israel's history; Jesus had spoken of this accumulation: "Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ... that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation." (Matt. 23: 32, 35 - 36). Israel reaches its lowest point in the rejection of Jesus, the Son of God.

But it is precisely this deepest act of rebellion that God turns into the instrument of salvation. We cannot reflect too much on this. Here Jesus is the remnant himself, the Jew who is totally righteous before his Father. God had sought for the totally faithful and righteous Israelite through the ages: "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her." (Jer. 5: 1). The Saviour is not a divine being who arrives from heaven as from outer space, without any roots on earth. He is raised up from among the chosen people, fully identified with them, and manifesting the ongoing covenant love of God for them. The understanding of the remnant opens us up to a deeper grasp of the redemption.

So we can get beyond inadequate presentations of the work of redemption through Jesus. For example, the view that sees the atonement in merely legal terms: i.e. that humanity has committed this weight of sins, and therefore another person needs to suffer an equivalent weight of punishment. This legal view ignores the identification of Jesus with his own people, even in their sin and rebellion, and through them with all humanity. It ignores the struggle with which Jesus resisted all the assaults of the enemy: it does not take adequate account of passages like: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5: 21). "For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted." (Heb. 2: 18: see also Heb. 4: 15). "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly." (1 Peter 2: 23). It is true that Scripture speaks of "the price" at which we have been redeemed (see 1 Cor. 6: 20), but such images illustrate one aspect of the redemption and should not be used to construct a total theology.

Just as in the Old Testament, God never goes back on his promises to his people because of their sin, though this sin produces much devastation and suffering, so with this "crowning" sin of the rejection of the Righteous One, God does not repudiate the Jewish people, even though they suffer serious consequences. So Jesus does not reject his people, who reject him: he prays for them on the Cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23: 34). But the promises are carried forward by the remnant who believe.

### A Second Rejection

There are two stages of Jewish refusal to believe in Jesus as Messiah, Saviour and Lord. The first is in his passion, which leads to his death by crucifixion. It is here that the remnant reaches its smallest, being concentrated in Jesus himself, and in Mary and John, who are highly symbolic figures. But then after the resurrection of Jesus and the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit, there is a second stage of refusal, when the majority of the Jewish people refuse to accept the testimony of the resurrection and the witness of the Holy Spirit to the gospel message. We see this second stage of refusal summed up in the speech of Stephen at his trial, who sums up the history in these hard words: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 7: 51). But by this time, the remnant of the Jews who accept the gospel of Jesus the Messiah is growing. And again, it is through this remnant that the promises of God are carried forward, and that the salvation won by Jesus for all people is made known. So it is in this context that we find the only use of the word “remnant” in the New Testament: “So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.” (Rom. 11: 5). Here Paul is clearly referring to the Jews who have believed in Jesus. For Paul has asked: “has God rejected his people?” And his categorical answer is “By no means!” (Rom. 11: 1). The evidence is that there always remains a remnant. However many times and however big a percentage of the chosen people do not believe, they remain his chosen. In some mysterious way, the Jews who accept Jesus hold up and carry forward their whole people. We will look later at what this principle means today.

### Discussion Points

1. What is new for you in this teaching?
2. What is the relation of the remnant minority to the rebellious majority?
3. Does this teaching tell us anything about the consequences of our own sin? In terms of suffering? In terms of redemption?