

Born to Win

The Remnant

by Ronald L. Dart

The story of the Elijah the prophet would make a *great* movie. I figure it would rank right up there with *The Ten Commandments*, but Cecil B. DeMille is long gone and so is Charlton Heston for the title role. For a while I thought maybe George C. Scott would make a better Elijah figure than Heston, anyway, but he's gone, too. All we've got left are these child actors in Hollywood, and none of them *really*, at all, would reach the level of this acting job.

The drama of the story lies in how Elijah had this big win on Mount Carmel and, days later, was fleeing for his life from a woman. You remember, don't you, he said:

1 Kings 17

AKJV

¹ As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.

And then he disappeared for three-and-a-half years. It's amazing. This guy—the archetype of all prophets, really—the power of this man, and he had hardly anything to say. Just that short sentence and he was gone. So, here he is; he comes back. He says, “I'm going to make it rain, but let's get everybody together on Mount Carmel.” So he gets all the priests of Baal, the prophets of Baal—all these religious leaders of the pagan religions that Jezebel had put in office—got everybody up to Mount Carmel, called down fire from heaven. It consumed an offering and everything around it, and then he took all these prophets down and killed all of them. So, it was that last thing, I think, that really got Jezebel's ire up, and she said:

1 Kings 19

AKJV

² [...] So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not your life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time.

She sent out guys looking for Elijah with instructions to take off his head. Well, Elijah ended up *thoroughly discouraged* in a cave on Mount Horeb.

1 Kings 19

NIV

¹ And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

By this time, the great prophet was feeling sorry for himself, so:

1 Kings 19

NIV

¹⁰ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

He had actually asked on one occasion:

1 Kings 19

AKJV

⁴ [...] O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.

Well, God was not impressed. The reply to him was blunt, “Get back to work.” He even told him to appoint a successor—which was a unique idea, for the work of a prophet is usually temporal and when it’s done, it’s done. In this case, I guess the work had to go *further* than one man’s life. But the most interesting thing about this whole episode comes almost as a by-the-way. Elijah was *not* the last faithful man. The Lord said:

1 Kings 19

NIV

¹⁸ [Oh, I still have] seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.

Now, Elijah did not know, and never would, who most of these people were. Now, if the population of Israel ran to a million folks at this time (which one authority said it did) God is talking about *seven-tenths of one percent* of the population. If there was a similar proportion out there in the United States today, that would run to about 1.4 million souls in the United States that had not bowed the knee to Baal nor kissed him. Sounds like a lot of people doesn’t it? But in a town of, say, 100,000. That might mean only 700 disconnected people—who didn’t even know who each other were. They were just people who *refused* to kiss that idol, who *refused* to bow down to that idol, because they believed in God.

Now, having said that, I have to note the number 7,000 is probably not absolute. Like the 144,000 in Revelation, the number is probably *symbolic* and not literal. I really don’t think God said, “Well, I’ve got 6,795 people who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Oh, sorry, 6,794—one of them just died.” I don’t think so. I think the number is to, kind of, give him an impression of a group of people out there who are carrying on. Now, much later, at the fall of Jerusalem there was a *remnant* who were left behind in the land. They were said to be the *poor* of the land. They were left behind as vine-dressers and farmers in what was to become a Babylonian province called “Judah”. One of their own—a Jew named get Gedaliah—was appointed governor of the land, and there existed a structured civil life. Farmers raised their crops, they brought their crops to market, they did all the things that people do. They could get married, they could have children, they could see their grandchildren, they could have peace, because the Babylonians were going to *see to it* that they had peace.

Now, surprisingly, a number of captains of the *Jewish army* were left, as well. The Babylonians weren’t stupid. They realized you can’t take all the fighting men out of here because *bandits* will take over everything. They needed a governor; they needed people to, kind of, keep things under order. They wanted these people living, and raising crops, and paying taxes. Well, it happens that one of these men—named “Ishmael”, of all things—assassinated Gedaliah and fled across Jordan and disappears from history. So they couldn’t be happy with everything just being like it was—we have to *improve on it* which, naturally, they did not. Another one of the officers—a man named Johanan—led a deputation to Jeremiah to ask for prayer, and I think this was really a pivotal point in the whole story. He asked:

Jeremiah 42

NIV

² “Please hear our petition and pray to the LORD your God for this entire remnant.” [...]

The idea of a *remnant* gets in here, and it seems to hold throughout all the Old Testament prophecies. Johanan continues:

Jeremiah 42

NIV

² [...] “For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left.

³ Pray that the LORD your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do.”

Jeremiah 42 is where you’ll find all this. Now, Jeremiah did what they asked. He got an answer from God, but they *refused* to follow instructions. They gathered up the king’s daughters and decamped to Egypt, dragging an unwilling Jeremiah right along with them. And the rest of the story is written in the Book of Jeremiah, of the things that God had to say to them because of that *stupid mistake*.

This idea of a remnant is remarkably persistent in the Bible. When the Assyrians invaded the land before this, and carried off the whole house of Israel from Samaria to the north, they invaded Judah all the way to Jerusalem. Isaiah, speaking on behalf of Israel, at the time lamented in saying:

Isaiah 1

AKJV

⁹ Except the LORD of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like to Gomorrah.

And, basically, *fire* descended from heaven and destroyed both of those cities and *everyone* in them. Isaiah repeatedly speaks of an escaping remnant, preserved by God through every calamity. The New International Version calls them “the survivors”.

Some time ago, I read a speech by a man named Albert Nock entitled *Isaiah’s Job*. I really think this article or speech was done back in the ’30s and it is *so prescient*. He paraphrases Isaiah and here’s what he had to say:

In the year of Uzziah’s death; the Lord commissioned the Prophet to go out and warn the people of the wrath to come. “Tell them what a worthless lot they are,” He said. “Tell them what is wrong, and why, and what is going to happen unless they have a change of heart and straighten up. Don’t mince matters. Make it clear that they are positively down to their last chance. Give it to them good and strong and keep on giving it to them. I suppose perhaps I ought to tell you,” He added, “that it won’t do any good. The official class and their intelligentsia will turn up their noses at you, and the masses will not even listen. They will all keep on in their own ways until they carry everything down to destruction, and you will probably be lucky if you get out with your life.”

Isaiah had been very willing to take on the job — in fact, he had asked for it — but the prospect put a new face on the situation. It raised the obvious question: Why, if all that were so — if the enterprise were to be a failure from the start — was there any sense in starting it?

“Ah,” the Lord said, “you do not get the point. There is a Remnant there that you know nothing about. They are obscure, unorganized, inarticulate, each one rubbing along as best he can. They need to be encouraged and braced up because when everything has gone completely to the

dogs, they are the ones who will come back and build up a new society; and meanwhile, your preaching will reassure them and keep them hanging on. Your job is to take care of the Remnant, so be off now and set about it.”...

Albert Jay Nock - Isaiah's Job

It's a rather free paraphrase of Isaiah, I'll admit, but it tends to resonate with what I know about the book. And those words, “your job is to take care of the remnant”, ring in my ears.

“Your job is to take care of the remnant.” I don't think I really ever thought of the *role* of a prophet in those terms before—but I can see it, I really can. Why are they there? Why does God send somebody down there just to tell us everything is going to come down around our ears? Of course, I *understand* it is so that we will repent, but he doesn't even when he knows we're *not going to* repent.

It's odd because this also resonates with where we find ourselves today—and in more ways than I might have thought. I think it's true *nationally*. There are more people than we know out there, trying their best to be faithful to God as far as their headlights penetrate into the gathering darkness. I think it's also true of the saints of the church. And this has led me to revisit an old idea—the idea of *the chosen ones*. It arises most powerfully in a parable of Jesus. (Now, I have to remind you of something or caution you about the parables: they're like allegories. They can actually find different meanings to different people. It serves the purpose of speaking to a man in any place any time. It allows us to bring ourselves to the story. It allows us to adapt the story to our culture. It also serves to *reveal* to one person while it *conceals* from another. So, these parables have to be approached with care. You want to look for the *central idea*.) The parable I'm talking about is found in Matthew, chapter 22. It's one of the kingdom parables introduced by this formula: “The kingdom of heaven is like...”

Matthew 22

AKJV

² The kingdom of heaven is like to a certain king, which made a marriage for his son[.]

Now, we all know, I think, that a royal wedding is a *very big deal*—nothing at all like the marriage of even a wealthy man and family. It's a very big deal; it's a *national* deal. And I would presume that the people who would be invited to such a marriage would themselves be important men and women—chieftains, perhaps—which perhaps goes to explain their response to the invitation. They are big enough; they can *afford* to turn it down. They snubbed the first invitation they got, and then they mistreated and even killed some of the servants who brought the insistent second invitation. The result was predictably dire: the king sent *armies* the next time and burnt the cities of those arrogant barons who rejected his invitation. Then something *remarkable* happens: the king sends his servants out into the roads to invite *anyone and everyone*, good and bad, to the wedding and fill the royal hall with guests. It would've been quite a celebration. Well, after all, you don't want your kid getting married and nobody coming around to celebrate—so fill it up!

In this parable, some people see the unresponsive leaders of the Jewish community who did not respond to God's invitation, followed by the invitation of the Gentiles into the wedding. Okay, that's one interpretation. But, as I said, one has to be *careful* interpreting parables—they are allegories and it's the *central theme* we want to understand.

There was a fellow who came to this wedding but who did not dress appropriately. When the king saw him he said, “Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?” The man was speechless. The king had his servants grab him and throw him out in the dark. This king was not a man to be trifled with. There are couple of things worthy of special note in this parable, but first here is how Jesus summarized it. If you're looking for the central theme, here it is:

Matthew 22

AKJV

¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.

It seems there are two things required—not one, two—to be one of the chosen. First is the invitation. The second is the *correct response*. The sad thing is, not many seem to make the response. Some people ignore it. Some people persecute the person who brings the invitation. Only a handful respond, and even some of them don't respond *properly*. An invitation to the kingdom of God is much broader than some of us might think, but it's *meaningless* without an RSVP. You know what that means, of course. "Respond, if you please. I'm having a wedding here. I'm having a reception. We've got food being prepared. I need to know if you're going to be here or not." And you don't show up to a wedding in blue jeans and running shoes. Respect to the occasion, respect to the couple, respect to the king, is *demanded*. Oh, I know, there are some weddings where you might dress differently. There was one that happened some time ago, I think, to a couple of skydivers. They got married jumping out of an airplane, falling to the earth. So if you're invited to that wedding, you would want to bring along a parachute. But normally we dress appropriately and somewhat formally for a wedding.

Well, it does seem that, even in the modern world—as it was in Elijah's, as it wasn't Jeremiah's, as it was in Isaiah's—there is a remnant. They are invited from every walk of life and a *response is demanded*. Most ignore the invitation, but there is that *handful*—the remnant, the chosen, the elect—who respond to the invitation and say, "We'll be there with bells on!" But in the days before the wedding, none of us knew *who else* had been invited. And that's the way it is. You're going to the wedding and sometimes you're hesitant to say to your friend, "Are you going to the wedding?", because maybe he *wasn't* invited. That happens to people from time to time. But as often as not, we wind up at the wedding and we see somebody you haven't seen in a long time and we didn't know they were going to be there. There are reasons to think that God may *want it that way*. For example, Matthew 5:13, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

Matthew 5

AKJV

¹³ You are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his flavor, with which shall it be salted? it is thereafter good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Well, you don't put all the salt in one place—you sprinkle it all over the place. Then there's another parable—Luke 13, verse 20.

Luke 13

AKJV

²⁰ And again he said, Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God?

²¹ It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

You know, it seems it was not long ago that I really tumbled to what this means. The work of the remnant goes on, out of sight and out of mind. You can't *see* salt in food, usually. You can't *see* leaven in bread, usually. But it is obvious that it has done its work. In the founding days of our society, the remnant was much more active than it is today, and you can see the results in what this nation became. People in the earlier days—if you didn't know the Bible you were considered partially illiterate, because the Bible was a part of the literature that was expected to be known to be *culturally literate* in that time. The results of that knowledge of the Bible in so many people and so many in leadership had an effect *like leaven* on the society.

In a radio program not long ago [*Whatever Happened to the Bible?*], I laid the responsibility for the sorry mess our society has become at the feet of *Christians*. We stopped reading our Bibles like our forefathers did. Like salt gone flat or leavening that has no life, we no longer affect society as we once did—nor do we affect *families*, nor do we even affect *churches* like we once did.

You know, it's a mistake to think of the remnant in terms of this or that *church*. The remnant, like salt, is not all together in one place. That might make it too easy to gather them up and *wipe them out*. "Oh, well that couldn't happen", you think, "No one can do that." Oh? How long has it been since you thought about what happened in the Holocaust? If you've never seen it, get the movie *Schindler's List*. It needs to be a part of your education of *why* God may keep his people scattered and out of sight.

On the other hand, there is this admonition in the Book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 10

AKJV

²⁴ And let us consider one another to provoke to love and to good works:

²⁵ Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching.

We absolutely must be in an assembly of believers—but even there, there is a remnant. You remember the parable of the tares? In the parable, a man prepares his ground and sows good wheat seed in the field. Overnight, some jerk, some teenage vandal, came along and sowed noxious seeds among the wheat. (Probably Halloween.) No one knew about this until the plants begin to grow. Now we have got wheat mixed with all who knows what. So what do we do now? Well, here's what Jesus said in answer to the question of what to do about it. It's in Matthew 13, verse 30.

Matthew 13

AKJV

³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather you together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

I take from this, it's a *mistake* to try to separate tares from wheat at this time, just like it's a mistake to try to separate members one from another because you may think one is more righteous than the other. It's too *easy* to make an error. And from this I gather it is a mistake to think you have to be part of a *pure congregation*. In fact, if you are in church and you put out your elbow, the odds are even you will bump into someone who is a *weed*. It's a terrible thing to say, I'm sorry, but it's *in the book*. It's in there more than once. That same idea is presented to us: we grow together and we can't always tell, and so we need to be nice to everybody and treat everybody like we're supposed to and do *our* job.

One of the most pernicious errors I have ever encountered is the idea of the *One True Church*. There is, of course, the Bible says:

Ephesians 4

AKJV

⁵ One Lord, one faith, one baptism[.]

But it doesn't go on to say, "one church". And the problem is that the very idea of a "true church" implies, well, everybody else except our church is a *false church*. Well, in the New Testament there are false prophets, false teachers, false brethren, but you never read of a *false church*. Make of that what you will; don't ignore it. Now, there's a natural question that follows on this, and someone asked Jesus about it. I think it's fair that we take a look. It's in Luke 13.

Luke 13

AKJV

²³ Then said one to him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said to them,

²⁴ Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say to you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.

Now, there's a mistake here—something you can trip over. You can *assume* that the time of seeking and being rejected is going on around us all the time. In other words, many people who are seeking into the kingdom of God are just not going to be able to do it. That's not exactly what he's driving at. The parable places the moment of decision in the *future*. Listen to how he puts it.

Luke 13

AKJV

²⁵ When once the master of the house is risen up, and has shut to the door, and you begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us; and he shall answer and say to you, I know you not from where you are:

²⁶ Then shall you begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in your presence, and you have taught in our streets.

²⁷ But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not from where you are; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity.

²⁸ There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.

²⁹ And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.

³⁰ And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

Now, this is astonishing, in a way. It's plain that, from where you sit, there will be *all sorts* of people *you never heard of* coming to sit with you in the kingdom of God, and a lot of people who thought they were insiders will be tossed out *in the dark*. All these kingdom parables fit together to form a bigger picture. In all of this, there is certainly the element of a *calling*, of the *invitation*. God is calling some now, others he'll call at a later time—but even now, that calling is *broad*. Problem is, I keep running into verses that suggest that the calling does have a lot to do with the *choices that men make*. In other words, there is a call but there is also *volition*—a will, a response, a decision. Ultimately, people will come from the four points of the compass and sit down in the kingdom of God. One word for all these scattered people is a “Christian *diaspora*”—the scattered ones. Another word for them is “the saints”. They are *the remnant*.

One way we can minister to the remnant is to pray for them, regularly. You'll never know who most of them are, but they're out there and they need your prayers. I regular remember these people in prayer with the phrase, “for all the saints, Lord.” I speak on the radio to an audience that, well, may reach 150,000 some weeks. *One out of a thousand* actually contact us. Slowly and tentatively those of the remnant reach out, and once in a while they bump into each other. Well, we do our work, mostly in ignorance of the people we serve. We may know about one in a thousand, but we still know what we have to do.

Hang in there. It may be rough, but it's worth every effort.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791

Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311

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