

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #86: ARE YOU PART OF GOD'S REMNANT?

By John Temples

Twice in the book of Romans, Paul speaks of a "remnant":

- "Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved" (Romans 9:27, quoting Isaiah 10:22).
- "Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:5).

What is a remnant? Here are some dictionary definitions:

- A small part or trace of a larger entity.
- A piece of cloth left over after the last cutting. ("Remnant sale")
- A small remaining or surviving subgroup of a once-larger group.
- Any small piece or quantity.

Paul is using the term "remnant" in these passages to mean the small number of people who are truly faithful to God. What we call "the faithful few," the Bible calls "God's remnant."

More and more, "remnant" is a word that you and I can identify with. When you attend church on Sunday morning, and pass by hoards of people on their way to the beach, or to the mall, or to restaurants, you feel the force of the term. And when you go back to church Sunday night or Wednesday night, you can really feel it.

There's a Scriptural principle we need to be often reminded of: In every generation, and under every divine covenant or dispensation, God has always had a relatively few real, true, and faithful followers. When Jesus met Nathanael, He told His other disciples, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!" (John 1:47). Other versions say "a true Israelite" (NIV) and "a genuine son of Israel"

(NLT). Jesus was saying, “Look! Here is a rare commodity: a true Israelite--one who is a Jew physically but also spiritually.”

The masses of people have always followed the broad path. At no time in Israel's history was the entire nation faithful to God, and it is still so today under the Christian dispensation: “Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:5). This principle has ramifications for how we view ourselves and how we view our work in God's kingdom.

IN NOAH'S DAY THE REMNANT CONSISTED OF JUST EIGHT SOULS: NOAH AND HIS FAMILY

How many people were on the earth in Noah's day? Genesis 6:1 says that before the Flood, “men began to multiply on the face of the earth,” suggesting a large number. Dr. Henry Morris, in his book *The Genesis Flood*, makes the case that there were 1,656 years between the creation and the Flood; there were 18 generations during that period; and people lived for hundreds of years and had large families. From these observations, Dr. Morris estimates that earth's population at the time of the Flood was one billion(!) people. The thought of it staggers: out of one billion people, only eight were faithful to God.

IN SODOM AND GOMORRAH, THE REMNANT WAS ONLY FOUR PEOPLE

Sodom and Gomorrah were two large cities located at the south end of the Dead Sea. A large percentage of the population--the majority--were sexual perverts. Remember when the Lord came and told Abraham that He was going to destroy those cities? Knowing that his nephew Lot and his family were residents of Sodom, Abraham began to plead with God. Would He spare the city if He could find 50 righteous souls in it? God said yes (Genesis 18:23-26). Abraham pressed his plea further: how about 45? 40? 30? 20? 10? Every time, God said yes. (Truly, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, Ezekiel 33:11.)

But when the destroying angels came to Sodom, they found and brought out only four righteous persons: Lot, his wife, and his two daughters. (And even the wife and daughters were reluctant to leave.)

IN THE DAYS OF THE EXODUS, ONLY A REMNANT ACTUALLY COMPLETED THE TRIP TO THE PROMISED LAND

Scholars estimate that the number of people who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership numbered over one million. Yet, of all the adults who started the exodus, at the end of the 40 years' wandering in the wilderness, only TWO were counted faithful to enter the Promised Land: Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:30).

THROUGHOUT THEIR HISTORY, THE MAJORITY OF THE JEWS WERE UNFAITHFUL TO GOD

In Elijah's day, the real (true, spiritual) Israel consisted of only 7,000 individuals (1 Kings 19:18, Romans 11:4). Isaiah lamented, "Hear O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken. I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not consider. Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers.... Unless the Lord of hosts had left to us *a very small remnant*, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah [utterly destroyed]" (Isa. 1:2-4,9).

God told Ezekiel that only a remnant would survive the Babylonian captivity and have the will to return to Jerusalem (Ezekiel 6:8).

AFTER ALL WAS SAID AND DONE, EVEN JESUS HAD ONLY A REMNANT

After over three years of intense activity and ministry, Jesus had how many faithful disciples? 120 (Acts 1:15). What happened? Where were all those thousands who had thronged and mobbed Him everywhere He went? The vast majority of them had turned away and "walked with Him no more" (John 6:66).

The truth is, Jesus held no illusions--He never expected the majority to follow Him. He said in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and *there are few who find it.*"

Did anything magically change after the Lord established His church and went back to heaven? No; Paul said in our text, "Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:5). What is all this telling us? The message is coming through loud and clear: *God's truly faithful people have always been, and always will be, in the minority.*

You might be saying by now, "John, this is totally depressing." Well, you should not be depressed. I'm just trying to point out what the spiritual conditions actually are, in the real world.

Consider that God and Christ knew from the beginning that only a relatively few would ultimately be saved; yet they lovingly and willingly went ahead and did what needed to be done to save the few. Our Lord knew most people would never obey Him, yet "for the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

As I said before, this truth has important ramifications for how we view ourselves and how we carry out the work of God's kingdom.

WHAT ARE SOME LESSONS FOR US TODAY?

First and foremost, we need to realize that if we have obeyed the gospel and are faithfully serving the Lord in His church to the best of our ability, then we are part of "God's faithful remnant." And it is the remnant that will be saved: "Isaiah also cries concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved'" (Romans 9:27).

It is absolutely vital that we stick it out to the end. There is nothing more important than going to heaven! Even though many others may fall away, you and I must not.

Second, membership numbers--church size--are not always an indicator of faithfulness. It's unfortunate but often true: the larger the church (think megachurches), the more likely it has compromised Biblical doctrine to gain members.

Third, we should be realistic and not expect everyone to follow Jesus. In fact, all these Biblical examples should lead us to expect the majority of people NOT to follow Jesus. *That is just the way it is.* This is vital if we are not to grow weary and get discouraged in preaching the gospel. We have a tendency to throw up our hands and throw in the towel when we share the gospel with person after person after person and experience so many rejections. We have seen that this has ALWAYS been the way it is, even in the days when the Lord Himself walked the earth; and it will ALWAYS be that way.

Lest you misunderstand, we cannot--we must not--diminish our efforts to reach the lost and to restore those Christians who have turned away from the Lord. But we should not be discouraged when crowds don't beat down the doors to get in. Paul said, "Let us not grow weary while doing good; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9).

And one more important point: since it is true that the number of true disciples will always be small, and that the majority in any given age will always serve Satan-- it is therefore pointless, fruitless, sinful, and counterproductive to water down the gospel and lower the standards of truth to get more people to come to church!
--John Temples