

## THE STARTING-POINT OF RECOVERY

### Watchman Nee:

We begin with Abraham because the divine plan of redemption begins with Abraham. When we open our New Testament the first words we read are these: 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.' Immediately the genealogy begins: 'Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judah and his brethren.' There can be no doubt, then, about Abraham's importance. Moreover, of all the Old Testament characters his is the name most frequently on the lips of the Lord Jesus. 'Before Abraham was, I am,' Jesus says. 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad' (John 8. 56, 58).

Everything began with Abraham; he is the starting-point of everything in redemption and in the purpose of God. The apostle Paul tells us that Abraham is 'the father of all them that believe' (Romans 4. 11). Not Adam but Abraham; for Adam is the starting-point only of human sin. From his day onward sin reigned.

Among the men who succeeded Adam there were, of course, those who shone as lights in the increasing darkness of those days. Abel was good; he offered sacrifices according to God's will, but he offered for himself alone. He was not specially chosen or prepared in relation to the purpose of God. Enoch, too, was simply an individual in his walk with God, and Noah was the same. None of these three was specially chosen by God in relation to the recovery of what was lost by Adam.

Abel, Enoch, Noah, all three worshipped God. Abraham did not; he worshipped idols. Things had gone from bad to worse, until the men in Ur of the Chaldees and in all the other cities around them were idolaters. And Abraham and Nahor and their father Terah were no different: 'they served other gods' (Joshua 24. 2). By himself Abraham was not morally the equal of any of those three men who went before him, Noah, Enoch or Abel. By nature he was on the same level as Adam after his fall, or as Cain. Yet he was the startingpoint for divine recovery.

Through none of those who preceded Abraham did God set Himself to deal with the situation created by sin. Abraham was the first through whom He did this.

Between Adam and Abraham, God worked with men as individuals. In Abraham God went further, and began to deal with the question of racial sin. God's whole movement to undo the consequences of the Fall began with him.

Redemption is completed and perfected in Christ, but redemption began with Abraham. Christ is the centre and the heart of God's redemptive purpose. Christ is the mid-point of the line of recovery, of which the kingdom of God in fullness is the end and Abraham is the startingpoint. For Abraham was not called and chosen for his own sake but for the sake of his descendants. He was called to be God's vessel in dealing with a tragic situation, not to receive something just for himself. To receive grace, and to transmit grace, are two different things.

When man fell, God took no immediate action. In Noah's day He judged the world, but He made no move yet to redeem it. Not until Abraham did He begin to deal with the situation at its heart. Abraham was called so that through him God might deal with the whole terrible problem of sin.

Right at the outset of God's call to Abraham we can see His aim clearly stated. 'Now the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will shew thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed' (Genesis 12. 1-3). Abraham was called to an inheritance, and this is a question of land. He was called also to be a great nation, and this is a question of people. Through him all the nations were to be blessed, and this surely indicates the moral sphere of his call.

All God's work for His people is connected with a land. If they were faithful, they possessed it; if not, they lost it. From that land all enemies would be cast out, and they were to occupy it for God. 'The land' is the central thought of the Old Testament. God wants a land for His own. It is not a question of the earth. In the Fall God lost the earth. Nor is it a question of heaven. Of course, there was never a problem about heaven. One day it will certainly be a question of recovery of the earth. God wants the whole earth back, and that will be accomplished in the fullness of His kingdom. Before that day, however, God wants a land. He wants that upon which He can take His stand as His very own. The land is His. It is at least one place where God can reveal Himself, can be heard and seen and can give to men His laws. First He has the land, then He will have the earth.

Today God still has `a land' in the earth, although it is not in one whole piece. In the past it was the territory and the whole kingdom of Israel. Now it is the Church, wherever the Church is in local expression-in Antioch, in Thessalonica, in Ephesus. It is still `the land', because the Body of Christ stands there. God's work of recovery begins with the land. Therefore every believer can stand for God and for His will in the place where he lives and works. He can occupy that piece of territory and hold it for God.

The recovery of the whole earth is based on the recovery of those portions now. As long as the people of God were in the land, God was `the possessor of heaven and earth'. When they lost the land, He was called `the God of heaven' only. When Melchizedek met Abraham after the battle of the kings, Abraham was already in the land. He could therefore say to the king of Sodom, `I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth' (Genesis 14. 22). But the time came when Israel lost the land, and then Nehemiah writes, `I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven' (Nehemiah 1. 4). Because they have let the land go, therefore the earth is lost to God.

Thus the land is not an end in itself; it stands for the whole earth. God is thinking ultimately in large terms. `Blessed are the meek,' says Jesus, `for they shall inherit the earth.' This earth of ours, which will come back to God in fullness at the end of this age, is being won back now by the meek. Just as in the Old Testament the land of Israel was a sort of token of God's claim upon the whole earth, so the different portions where His children stand for Him now are a token of His sovereign right to the whole earth today. God wants us not only to preach the Gospel and to edify and build up His Church, He wants us especially to stand on this earth for Him.

The New Testament parallel to `the land' is the expression we find in the Gospels: `the kingdom (or rule) of heaven'. The land was the sphere upon this earth in which God's writ ran, the place where His power was effective. When the New Testament speaks of the kingdom of heaven it has in view just such a sphere in the earth today where the rule of God is effective. The question today is, does heaven reign already in the Church? It certainly does not anywhere else.

I think we will agree that this is more than an individual matter. It calls for God's children in a given place to stand together subject to His rule, so that through them His rule becomes an effective thing there. It is not only a question of the preaching of the Gospel but also of the presence of the kingdom. The Gospel of grace is for the salvation of sinners. The Gospel of the kingdom is intended to bring back to God the earth which is His by right. Unless our work affects the earth in this way, it is falling short of God's purpose.

God used much time to establish Abraham in the land of promise. As soon as Abraham left it a little way, to go to Egypt or to go to Gerar, he was in moral defeat. We spiritualize these things and draw from them lessons about Abraham's personal walk with God, but in doing this we may overlook something important. It is this, that God wanted the land because God wants the earth.

Then secondly, Abraham's call was not only a question of a land but also of a people. `I will make of thee a great nation.' That was God's motive in calling this man to Himself from among a world of idolaters.

Conditions had greatly changed since Adam's day. Adam was judged and punished, and as we have said, he was not thereafter concerned with the earth as a whole. The only demand made upon his generation was for individual godliness. They either sought after God or they did not. With the generation of Noah, however, something different is introduced, namely, a law (Genesis 9. 3-6). Men were given the opportunity of cooperating together under a law of God, or of course could choose to do so apart from Him. From that time man became part of an organization. Babel is the great result of mankind's organizing itself, and from this ultimately comes Babylon, the counterfeit of the Body of Christ. Then, at the beginning of the world as we now know it, God chose out Abraham with a view to securing for Himself a people.

In Adam's time, and in Noah's, God dealt with the whole world. All humanity left Eden in Adam. In the Flood the whole world came under judgment. These were the disastrous results of the Fall. Now we come to the time of Abraham and God is going to begin a work that will undo the effects of that Fall. How will He do this? He is not going to sweep the whole world back to Himself, willy-nilly. He will work to secure a people through whom He can win the world. Abraham is the beginning of the choice of God, and he was called not only to lay claim for Him to a land but also to secure for Him a people.

The greater part of the Old Testament is taken up with the record of God's people on the earth. Have we realized what it means to say that God has a people on earth? Suppose we belong to a business house having widespread overseas interests. How confidently we say, `We have a man in Tokyo, or in Manilla,' meaning a

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representative in that place. That is just what God has in His people on the earth, and that is how He would speak of them. Immediately Israel turned from God to idols they lost their position as the people of God-and God lost His people. `The land doth commit great whoredom, departing from the Lord .... Call his name Lo-ammi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God' (Hosea 1. 2, 9). They might commit other sins, and then they were a sinning people, but still the people of God. When, however, they fell into idolatry they were no longer His people. He had to repudiate them.

The nation of Israel was to be a witness to God, a people who enshrined God's presence. Where Israel was, Jehovah was. When their foes came against them it was God they encountered. To deal with them they must deal with God. While Israel were true to God they held a unique position, apart from and superior to the other nations. That was gone as soon as they yielded to idolatry. Where God has a people now, He has a witness: where He has no people, He has no witness.

The call of Abraham has a special character, unique in the Old Testament. There was nothing quite like it, for this was God's first great reaction to the Fall. It was the beginning of His answer to the problem of sin. Abraham was to reveal God as the Redeemer who calls men out of a world of idolatry to faith in Himself.

What is the Church today? She is the people of God, or in the words of Acts 15. 14, `a people for his name'. As God once committed His purpose to Abraham so today He has committed everything to His Church.

It is not enough therefore just to preach the Gospel for individual salvation. That must be done, and every one of us must seek to win men individually out of the world to faith in Jesus Christ; but let us understand the motive behind such work. It is not just that the sinner should be saved and should arrive at a place of security and contentment. God wants a people for Himself, who will confess Him before men. Every born-again child of God must be taught to take His place in that witnessing people. For God does not deal directly with the nations today, but through the Church which is His Body. It is to take our share in the task that we have been called, and God desires that we should find our place there.