

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the Lives of Old Testament Characters: Ruth

Among the sixty six books of the Bible, the Book of Ruth shares the distinction, together with the book of Esther, of being the only two Bible books named after women. One is the story of a poor Moabite stranger; the other is the story of an Israelite, chosen by a despotic Persian king to be his queen. While the Book of Ruth bears striking witness to the grace of God, that of Esther reminds us of the providence of God. We need both those reminders today!

The story of Ruth is quickly told. Elimelech, and his wife, Naomi, left their native town of Bethlehem because of the famine there. Their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, went with them. They settled in the land of Moab. After a while, Elimelech died and the two sons married Orpah and Ruth, women of Moab. Some ten years later, the sons died. Now Naomi was left alone with her daughters in law. Hearing that the famine was over in Bethlehem, Naomi decides to return home. Ruth could not be persuaded to leave her mother in law, and goes back with her. In Bethlehem, she meets, and marries, Boaz, a wealthy relative of Elimelech and Naomi. Boaz and Ruth are blessed with a son, Obed, who became grandfather to King David. This is only a summary of the story. Please take time after the broadcast to read the book for yourself.

In our talk this morning, we shall be able only to touch on some of the lessons from this lovely Bible book. It will help us to consider these under the headings:

- The Place
- The Purpose
- The People
- The Pledge

The Place

Mention Bethlehem and most of us will instinctively remember it as the place where Jesus, the Son of God, was born. It is still an important, if troubled, part of Israel today. The first time we read about Bethlehem in the Bible is when Jacob buries his wife, Rachel, there (you can read about it in Genesis 35). The story of Jacob and Rachel is one of the great love stories of the Bible. Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Jacob agreed to work for his uncle Laban for seven years if he could marry Rachel. When those seven years were up, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah. Laban then agreed that Jacob could also marry Rachel if he served another seven years. Of that long period of time we read that those years "seemed unto [Jacob] but a few days, for the love he had to [Rachel]" (Genesis 29:20). That great love story came to an end at Bethlehem, when Rachel died in giving birth to Benjamin.

The name, Bethlehem, means "house of bread". Ruth certainly found no shortage of that when she returned to Bethlehem with Naomi. Bethlehem was also the town where David was born. There was a time in David's experience when he was forced to leave Bethlehem because his enemies, the Philistines, were after him. One day, he longed for a drink of water from the well of Bethlehem. Some of his mighty men broke through the Philistine guard on Bethlehem that night to bring him such a drink. David felt that that water was too precious to drink because his men had hazarded their lives for it. He poured it out as an offering to God (you can read about it in 2 Samuel 23).

It is interesting how these three different strands of Bethlehem's history can be seen in the coming of Jesus, born at Bethlehem. There the greatest love story in the Bible, and indeed in the whole of history, had its beginning. The apostle John puts it in this way, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The Lord Jesus would say of Himself, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger" (John 6:35). He could also say to the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar, "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst" (John 4:14).

The Purpose

Why is this short book of only four chapters in the Bible? Because it is part of God's great plan of salvation! This plan of salvation is not for Israel only, or for Moab only, but for the whole world! Here we see part of the working out of that

plan which is God's answer to the promise He first made to Adam and Eve in Eden, "It (the seed of the woman) shall bruise thy (Satan's) head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

At the end of chapter 4 of Ruth, a genealogy is given in which the descent of David is traced back through Boaz to Pharez. Everything seems to be in proper order. That genealogy is only part of a fuller genealogy which we can read in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 1. Matthew wrote his gospel to show us that the Lord Jesus came to be King of the Jews. It was absolutely vital, therefore, at the outset of his gospel that the royal lineage of the Lord Jesus, as a Man, be demonstrated. That lineage had to be established through the male line, as the law required. So in Matthew 1, the descent of the Lord Jesus, as to the flesh, is traced back from His being the child of Mary and, legally, Joseph, through David, right back to Abraham. God had promised Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through his seed.

But in this male line in Matthew chapter 1, we are introduced to four women: Tamar, the daughter in law of Judah, who was the father of her child, Pharez; Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, the mother of Boaz; Ruth, the Moabitess (of that idolatrous nation given over to the worship of their god, Chemosh), mother of Obed; and Bathsheba, whose first child, born of an adulterous relationship with David died, and who subsequently became the mother of Solomon. There are no skeletons in the cupboard when God is at work! These women, perhaps more sinned against than sinning, have their place, in the grace of God, in the human genealogy of His Son. In this way it would be demonstrated that the Lord Jesus, though Himself totally without sin, came into a world of sinners. How appropriate it is that He would say, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance!" (Matthew 9:13)

The People

We shall only have time to consider Naomi and Ruth. Naomi stands as striking confirmation of the fact that there is always a way back to God. There's a way back for the repentant sinner, as Jesus' parable of the prodigal son so vividly illustrates (Luke 15). But there is always a way back for the child of God who has wandered away from God. It was no easy matter for Naomi to return to Bethlehem and admit that she had been wrong. Her name means 'pleasant' but she had to say to her friends and neighbours, "Call me not Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara (meaning 'bitterness'): for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty" (Ruth 1:20-21). Are you a child of God who has wandered away from the Lord? Then learn from this story of Naomi that there is always a way back to God! God promises us in His word, "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Naomi had not yet learned, as the Christian learns, though often through tears, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28). But, before long, she would learn something of the grace and goodness of God towards her.

Those had been ten or more wasted years for Naomi. But had they really been wasted years? What was it that made her daughter in law, Ruth, ready to leave her own people and to make Naomi's God her God? Surely it was that Ruth had seen in Naomi a faith at work, in all the ups and downs of Naomi's life. Ruth desperately wanted to share that same faith. With an effect like that, they could never be described as wasted years! Naomi is the only mother in law mentioned by name in the Bible. That relationship, so often the butt of cruel jokes today, is seen in Naomi and Ruth in all its striking power for blessing. Naomi's life stands as a challenge to mothers in law everywhere, and, indeed, to all of us today. Do others so see Christ at work in us that they want to come to know Him too?

How many and varied are the lessons which we can learn from Ruth! We will look at

- Her commitment
- Her confession
- Her care
- Her companions
- Her confidence

Her commitment

Ruth's moving words, as her sister in law went back to her home in Moab, but Ruth refused to leave Naomi, have become part of our literature. Let's read them together. You will find them in chapter 1, verses 16 and 17: "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me." We will come back and consider these words in more detail in our final heading, The pledge.

Her confession

Ruth and Naomi were probably penniless when they arrived in Bethlehem. So the next morning, Ruth had to go out and earn their daily bread. It was the beginning of barley harvest and Ruth went and gleaned in the fields of Boaz, although Boaz was not yet known to her. Along with others, she gathered up the fragments of grain which had been left by the reapers. Under the law given to Moses, God had made this special provision “for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow” (Deuteronomy 24:19). No farmer was to strip his fields clean of their harvest. Something must be left for the less well-off. In this way, God shows His deep care for the needy in society. Ruth was not ashamed to confess that she was amongst these needy.

Her care

All that day, Ruth gleaned in the field. At the end of the day, though no doubt tired and weary, Ruth set to and carefully separated the kernels of grain from the chaff. Nothing was wasted! In no way would she despise God’s gracious provision. So she brought food home to Naomi, sufficient for them both. God has given His word, the Bible, to us as spiritual food to nourish our Christian lives. Through reading it, we can “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Do I, do you, show this same care, which Ruth showed, in coming to it to glean from it day by day?

Her companions

Boaz had noticed the stranger gleaned in his field. On inquiring of his steward in charge of the reapers, Boaz was told that the stranger was Ruth, the Moabitess. Boaz then charged Ruth, “Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens” (Ruth 2:8). She would find safety and provision among these companions. As Christians, we need to find help and encouragement in each other’s company. Indeed, the Bible expressly tells us, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). When Peter and John were released from prison, we read, “Being let go, they went to their own company” (Acts 4:23). They knew that they belonged with their fellow Christians. As Christians, let us seize every opportunity to meet together with fellow believers to worship God and to study His word, as far as we are able.

Her confidence

Would Boaz marry Ruth, or wouldn’t he? Would her life be changed, or would it continue in the same old way? Naomi wisely advises Ruth, “Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall” (Ruth 3:18). God was at work for Ruth! “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10) is still the word of the Lord to us today. Yet how hard at times we find it to be still - when we are waiting for that exam result, that job application, that possible house move, that life-changing decision, for recovery from illness, either our own or of someone we love! Yet in all the circumstances of life, the promise of God remains: “In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).

The pledge

Remember the moving words of Ruth’s commitment: “...thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16). The idol worship of Moab had no more attraction for Ruth. She had seen something better in Naomi! When the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, He sent this triumphant message by Mary Magdalene, “Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (John 20:17). That was the good news, from God’s side, of a new relationship. Ruth declares in her words her readiness for a new commitment to, and relationship with, the God of Naomi. Her devotion to Naomi, and to Naomi’s God, still challenges us today. Her words have about them that ring of dedication which we hear from Ittai as he pledges himself to David, “As the Lord liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be” (2 Samuel 15:21). The Lord Jesus, through His death on Calvary’s cross, has done far, far more for you and me than Naomi ever did for Ruth, than David ever did for Ittai. Are we as committed as they were?

In these words, Ruth pledges herself unreservedly to the God of Naomi. Her faith in God shone out so that others, in turn, could see it in her. So Boaz could say to her, “The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust” (Ruth 2:12).

In all the ups and downs of life, Ruth’s God is our God, though we know Him, as revealed through the Lord Jesus, in a far fuller way than Ruth ever could. Let us commit ourselves and our ways to Him! Let us count on Him to provide for us, and to act for us, in all the details of our lives.

We cannot do better than close with the words of the psalmist: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him

will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler" (Psalm 91:1-4).

A prayer:

God, our Father, thank You for the reminder today of Your grace. May it draw us closer to yourself and to the Lord Jesus that we may the better follow Him. Amen.

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