

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

The Pleasant with the Bitter – (Ruth Chapter 1) This week we breathe deeply the fresh air of one of the Old Testament's most endearing stories, we begin our study of the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is rather short containing no more than four chapters, but disclosing a good deal of information about the conditions of one family in ancient Israel during the period of the Judges. This family, no ordinary family, is reported at the book's end to be none other than the ancestors of the king, the one whom God will choose to completely subjugate the Philistines beneath his people, as well as to whom he would make the promise of a coming King that would subjugate every enemy, including sin, beneath the feet of his elect covenant community. As we begin our exploration of the book of Ruth, it is important that we keep in mind the greater story of God's redemptive plan. We already know from Genesis 3:15 that the "seed" of the woman will crush the serpent's head. We also know from Genesis 15 that the promise of a "seed" is tantamount to the Abrahamic covenant, the immediate fulfillment being the miraculous birth of Isaac, and the ultimate fulfillment bring the miraculous birth of Christ (Galatians 3:16). The story of Ruth is told throughout from the perspective of a woman: Naomi. This woman learns a very important lesson about the God of the covenant, a lesson at the very heart of all scripture. We will gaze into the pages of holy writ and learn this lesson with her.

Part One: From Famine to A Foreign Country – The first verse of chapter one places the events about to transpire in the context of the period of the Judges. How far back and under whose judgeship, we do not know; however, the short lineage from Boaz to David suggests that it was toward the end of the era of the judges, perhaps during the time of Samson or Jephthah. It is apparent from the introduction that the Lord had exacted judgment upon his people (no doubt as a result of their apostasy) by means of a famine that had made it unbearable to dwell in the land of Bethlehem Judah. How many people followed Elimelech and left Bethlehem, we do not know. We do know that Elimelech's time there was intended to be limited since he is described as sojourning in the land. While living in the land of Moab, Elimelech dies. His sons, Mahlon and Chillion, marry two women from the land of Moab. It is important to note that the Moabites, though not belonging to the covenant community and expressly forbidden to enter the temple of God, and arguably the covenant community, until the tenth generation (Deuteronomy 23:3), were part of the household of Abraham through Lot, Abraham's nephew. You may recall that Lot fled from Sodom and Gomorrah when God destroyed those cities (Genesis 19:23-29). While living in a cave for fear of the people of Zoar, his daughters deceitfully enticed him to be with them and bore him sons that were also his grandsons. The son of the first-born daughter was named Moab from whom came all the descendants of the Moabites.

When Israel came out of Egypt, God explicitly told them (Deuteronomy 2:9) not to harass or attack the people of Moab because he had given the land of Moab to them for the sake of Lot, Abraham's nephew. Therefore, even though they were outside of the covenant community, they were descendants from a man who greatly benefitted from the covenantal blessings during his lifetime. God never told Israel not Baney, Lesson 17 Winter/Spring 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

to intermarry with the Moabites, he explicitly instructed them not to intermarry with the Canaanites. However, the implications of the command not to intermarry with the former inhabitants of the land of promise was for the sake of preventing intermarriage between members of the covenant community and those outside. Therefore, it can be earnestly stated that the sons of Elimelech sinned when they married Moabite women.

After a period of ten years, Mahlon and Chilion also die and leave their grieving mother childless and a widow. It is helpful to observe a few characteristics about this story up to this point. First, the man who leads his family into Moab on a journey to escape the judgment of God (Elimelech) stands out against the spirit of the age. We have already made note of the consistent theme that could well summarize the period of the Judges: *“There was no king in Israel, every man did what was right in his own eyes.”* Elimelech, in Hebrew means, *God is my king*. This man, living in the period of the judges when everyman did what was right in his own eyes, sought to submit to the sovereign rule of the true king of Israel: YHWH. Such submission led him for a time to sojourn in the land of Midian. There he died, and was apparently buried. There, too, his sons died and were apparently buried. In their place, God raised up a man (Boaz) who would take the lineage of the one who made God king, and give birth to one whom God would make king.

It is also remarkable to observe the relevance of place names in this story. The name of the city from which Elimelech and his family came was Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means, *house of bread*. It was from the house of bread that the man (whose king is God) fled during a time of grievous famine. They journeyed (of all places) to the “fields” of Moab. Such agrarian language is used subtly on the part of the author to provide early indications of what is about to transpire. The names of Elimelech’s two sons (Mahlon and Chilion) bear the Hebrew meanings of “sick” and “annihilation” respectively. As such they can be viewed as parabolic of the conditions in Israel at the time. Naomi, on the other hand, means *pleasant*.

Part Two: A Tale of Two Loves – After hearing a report that God had again visited his people in the land of Israel and given them food (vs. 6), Ruth decides that she will return to the land of the covenant, and instructs her daughters-in-law whom apparently initially planned to accompany her (vs. 7a) to return to the land of their nativity. She blessed them with the hope of remarrying someone with whom they can find rest and bear children. Their response was revealing and their actions more so. They both respond, *“No, we will return with you to your people”* (vs. 10). Naomi, discourages them from accompanying her assuming that the longing of their hearts would naturally be for marriage and to bear children. She tells them, *“Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me”* (vs. 11-13).

The responses of the two daughters-in-law to this plea of Naomi is a tale of two loves. Verse fourteen of our text states, *“Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.”* Notice that Orpah, kissed her mother-in-law and obeyed: she loved the prospect of marrying again, and having children. She welcomed the thought of returning to the house of her father and the land of her nativity. Ruth, on the other hand, clung to Naomi. In these acts, both girls were revealing the nature of the thing they loved. Orpah wanted rest, Ruth wanted life. When Naomi

Baney, Lesson 17 Winter/Spring 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

again attempted to persuade Ruth to return to the land of Moab, she stated, *“See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods: return after your sister-in-law.”* It is notable that Naomi referenced the fact that her sister-in-law did not only return to her own people (the Moabites), but also that she returned to their gods. This is (arguably from the text of the book of Ruth), the uncommon denominator between Ruth and Orpah.

Ruth’s reply to Naomi is further proof that she has come to trust in the covenant making Lord, the true God of Israel. She states, *“Do not urge me to leave or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you”* (1:16-17). The source of Ruth’s tenacity which goes far beyond her loyalty to her mother-in-law is her willingness to leave the land of her nativity, forsaking all kindred, to leave the gods of her ancestors, and to follow whole-heartedly after the covenant making Lord. By using the covenantal name of God in this proclamation (YHVH), Ruth is revealing that she is familiar with the God of the covenant, and possibly the very nature of that covenant. She is expressing her desire to come under the covenant and accompany her mother-in-law back into the land of promise. Whether she was familiar with the injunction forbidding admittance of a Moabite into the congregation of the Lord, is uncertain. If she were, then it would seem even more significant that she would choose to accompany Naomi knowing that she and her children would be treated as outsiders for the next ten generations.

Ruth loved Naomi, but she loved the Lord God of Israel as well. What she learned about God in the house of her husband and his mother, would only be demonstrated in her own life once she settled in Bethlehem. It was this love for the covenant keeping Lord, that made her willing, not unlike Abraham who was called to do something similar in Genesis chapter twelve, to leave her land of origins in search of life: YHVH.

Part Three: The Trial of Bitterness – When Naomi returns to Bethlehem and is recognized by the leaders, she instructs them not to call her by her name, Naomi, but to call her by a new name – Mara (bitter). Her explanation for such a name is, *“... for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity on me”* (1:20-21).

It is interesting to observe the play on words throughout the first chapter of this rather small book. In verse 13, when attempting to send away her two daughters-in-law she tells them that, *“...it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me...”* The Hebrew word here translated as “bitter” is *mar*, the same word used to describe the manner in which the Almighty had purportedly dealt with her (see above reference). In other words, her own feelings regarding her circumstances created the lens through which she viewed God’s activity in her life. In this regard, the book of Ruth is timelessly modern. We often interpret the working of God in our lives through the lens of our own personal feelings. We see this again in verse 21 when she states that the Lord has “testified” against her. She has mistakenly read the testimony of the Lord by jumping to conclusions before the work of the Almighty is complete. No doubt she will have a much different perspective in a very short period of time.

One final point should be made about Naomi’s comment to the residents of Bethlehem. She makes the comment (referenced above) that she left full and is coming back empty. She has quickly forgotten the conditions of her earlier departure. She did not sojourn in the land of Moab because she was bored, nor

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

was her time there attributed to wander lust. Rather, she sojourned in the land of Moab because there was a famine in the land. This famine would have prevented her from leaving “full” as she here states. Although she is unaware of what God is doing in time and history, the truth remains that she actually left empty and was returning full. She left with three grievous deaths looming before her. She returns with the hope of a future son who will be an ancestor of the king. Were the circumstances encountered in exile bad? Absolutely, but we are given insight into a profound mystery of scripture: it is not only the divine appointment of nations and kingdoms with which the providence of God is concerned, he is concerned with the minute details of one individual life as well. He is weaving the details of each life both tragedies and triumphs into a tapestry that will testify to his sovereign rule over time and all of creation.

Naomi was called to accept the pleasant with the bitter, and so are we. Her willingness to return to the house of bread, Bethlehem, after a forced exile in the fields of Moab was the first step to a new life. The flower she brought with her upon her return would bloom into a matriarch, an ancestor not only of king David, but of Christ himself. This is even more significant in light of the prohibition regarding the Moabites entering the assembly of the Lord until the tenth generation. Even David would not have been the tenth generation, being only four generations removed. So what made Ruth exceptional? We will begin exploring the answer to this question next week, but will explore it more fully in the final lesson, when we read and understand the transaction of chapter three.

The bitterness of Naomi’s experience in Moab is contrasted by reference to God’s *hesed*, his covenantal love. The *hesed* of God, or חֶסֶד in Hebrew, is a term that conveys a similar meaning as the Greek *charis* or English, *grace*. *Hesed* is not used to simply denote kindness, but to express a degree of kindness that can only be expected within the context of a covenantal relationship. How then, could Naomi have pronounced such a blessing on her daughters-in-law who were clearly not part of the covenant community (1:8)? The answer lies in the fact that both wives were brought into the realm or influence of the covenant (similar to the spouse of a non-believer today who benefits from a believing spouse 1 Corinthians 7:14) when given in marriage to Naomi’s sons. Ruth, wanted more than an auxiliary benefit from the covenant of God. Ruth sought shelter within the covenant household. Consequently, she would come to experience and demonstrate the concept of *hesed* in her own life.

Conclusion: The book of Ruth provides a stark contrast to the book of Judges. Reading the characteristics of the period of the judges leads one to reasonably assume that all Israel were apostate at worse and theologically confused (i.e. Jephthah) at best. However, this was not the case. There were remnants of the faithful living within Israel who were afflicted along with the sinful in the execution of God’s judgment. There were those who endeavored to live faithful to the covenant. There were periods of relative ease and comfort when the social system of the people of God did not suffer constant bombardment by outside invading forces. Whereas the book of Judges reveals to us the 30,000-foot view of the conditions of God’s people in ancient Israel during the period of the judges, the book of Ruth reveals to us the intimate details of everyday happenings in the lives of God’s people.

In a manner of speaking, Ruth is demonstrative of the manner in which God’s covenant people were called to live. Though she were a Moabite, she became an heir to the covenant and a vital member of the family of God. Throughout the book of Ruth, it is the concept of *hesed* that ties together the tragedies and the triumphs and informs the reader of the redemptive work of a gracious God.