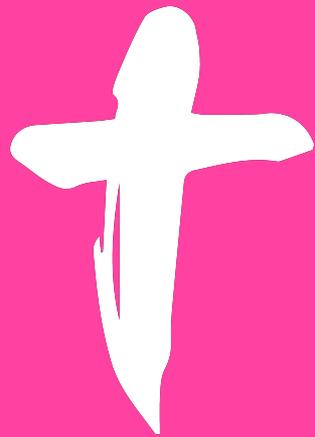


RUTH



Ruth

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Lesson One

Going away

The book of Ruth is a beautiful story of loving commitment and the unseen hand of God working in our lives.

In the lockdown of 2020 I thought it would be a great opportunity to read the Bible through from cover to cover in two months. I would have to read for 1 1/2 hours each day and to keep it fresh I would read in two or three sittings each day.

Although reading the Scriptures is a delight I found the history of God's people a disappointment and therefore a little depressing.

Emerging out of the Book of Judges, one of the darkest periods in Israel's history, I turned the page to discover the delightful little book of Ruth.

Behind the beautiful story of Ruth looms an invisible helper. As the story unfolds the reader is urged to delight in the certainty of the security of God's providence. He doesn't intervene in the events, so far as the story tells. But nobody in Ruth doubted that life proceeded under God's direction.

The little book that can be read in less than 15 minutes reminds us that the God who manages global events is also concerned with the ordinariness of people's lives.

A brief overview of the story

Ruth, a young Moabite widow, because of her love and commitment to her mother-in-law leaves her idol worship to follow the one true God. Once in Israel God leads Ruth to a man named Boaz who she eventually marries. As a result Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of Israel's great King David placing her in the ancestral line of the Messiah.

Ruth 1: 1-7

The famine

Moving house is not a task most people undertake lightly. It is costly and unsettling. Although Elimelech would not have had the same amount of domestic gadgetry as a modern-day house-owner it was still a major undertaking. His decision to leave Bethlehem, his home town, was because of a famine.

Bethlehem means 'House of Bread' which indicates that a famine in this region was very unusual.

Because of the famine, Elimelech decided that he and his family should go and live for a while as resident aliens in the land of Moab.

Was the famine a mark of God's displeasure? We do not know! Other Bethlehemites stayed to see the famine through. If Elimelech journeyed to save the lives of his family we know his goal was not achieved. The three men of the family died leaving Naomi a widow and isolated in a foreign country.

The history between Israel and neighbouring Moab was not good. During the Exodus the Moabites refused to help the Israelites when they could have and during the early period of the time of the judges, Eglon, the king of Moab, had invaded Israel and pressed their people into servitude for eighteen years.

Why did Elimelech choose to go to Moab a country where the Lord was not worshipped? Did he lack faith in God? If this was a foolish move the rest of the book of Ruth amply demonstrates that God's gracious providence is not bound by man's foolishness.

The names

To our author, names are significant, they carry a special significance in his purpose. To the Hebrew way of thinking, to know a person's name is to know his character. Supremely when God tells us his name, he tells us his character, and shares himself with those to whom he speaks. The Lord, Jehovah, is God's personal name, the name that reveals that God is a covenant God.

Elimelech means 'My God is King'. Should such a name not express faith and confidence in God? While there is no promise of a trouble-free life, there is always the promise of daily bread, and the assurance that there is no need to be morbidly anxious about tomorrow. Part of faith is what God gives us to help us cope with uncertainties.

Naomi means 'pleasant, lovely, delightful': and the poignant significance of this name comes into prominence after Naomi later returns from Moab with Ruth her daughter-in-law, saddened by the bitter experience which she believed she had received from the Lord's hand. ***"Do not call me Naomi", she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter"***.

Mahlon and Kilion. Mahlon seems to be linked to the root meaning 'to be sick', and Kilion signifies something like 'failing' or 'pining' even annihilation.

Orpah and Ruth are Moabite names and their meaning are not too clear.

The deaths

"Elimelechdied both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband."

Death is in one sense the most natural and yet in another the most unnatural of events. All men are mortal; man's time on earth is limited. Death inescapably reminds man of his frailty and his limits.

What significance, we may wonder, did the believers in Jehovah place on death when Naomi lost her two sons and husband?

For the most part, death in the Old Testament is an ambiguous and shadowy state.

Psalm 88: 5-6. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. You have put me in the darkest depths.

On the other hand those with a strong faith in Jehovah believed that the one true God awaited them.

Psalm 73:24. You guide me with your counsel and afterwards you will take me into glory.

For the believer today the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead fills us with a certainty that death brings unending fellowship with the Lord. Our bodies will be resurrected to more complete spiritual bodies, fitted for life in the next world.

How devastating for Naomi, that one person should be called to suffer so much. Losing her home and then the three men in her family it meant that there would be no heir by which their names will be continued and their inheritance guaranteed. Surely it was undeserved. Are we not introduced here to the dark side of God's providence - that some of our pains seem unbearable, some of our circumstances so unjust; some of our questions stay without answers?

Faith, we are to learn from Naomi, sometimes means a willingness to leave such questions in the mystery of God, in the confidence that in the brighter days he has shown himself trustworthy.

The Lord came to the aid of his people

Where do we go in such hard times? Faith will sometimes mean leaving unanswered difficulties in the hands of God. Such faith will be strengthened by keeping in the front of our minds the ways God has helped us in the past.

Part of the spirituality of the men and women of faith of Naomi's day was to meditate on the great acts of God in the past, and we can learn from them how to keep faith alive in the dark times.

She heard the news "***in Moab that the Lord had not abandoned his people by providing food for them.***" The God who comes to meet his people in need, the God who sets his people free.

Our author is anxious that the character of the Lord will dominate the narrative. It is as if he wants his readers to place the details of his story's pains and joys within the context of the God whose character is to deliver.

The report that Naomi had received was not that 'the weather had broken', or 'there had been an upturn in the economy', or 'the threat of invasion has gone'. It is in the terms of the Lord's action... "***the Lord has come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.***" Here is the central theme in the Bible: all of life is traced directly to the hand of God. She now sets off with Ruth and Orpah to journey home.

Lesson Two

Coming home

Ruth 1: 8-22

Naomi's care

Real faith can always be measured by its loving fruit, and Ruth who comes to faith in God must have learned from Naomi the reality of faith.

Naomi is now established in the story as the main character in chapter one. In the unfolding of the story Ruth and Boaz will become the main characters, for the remainder of this lesson we will concentrate on Naomi's unshaken faith.

Naomi's loving concern for her daughters-in-law first finds its expression in prayer.

Prayer the flip side of providence

Prayer is the acknowledgement of the fact that we believe that God is there. God rules and provides, and believes it in such a way that we are ready to do something on that basis, namely speak to him.

Prayer is an activity by which we acknowledge that we cannot be our own lord.

Prayer is our way of expressing our 'yes' to the conviction that God is working his purpose out in nature, in men, in history.

Prayer is our way of responding to his invitation to be a member of his covenant family, his son or daughter, his co-worker in the world.

Prayer is our response to God's invitation to share fellowship with him, an expression of our union with him.

It is something beyond our understanding that God's lordship is such that he allows us a place in his government of the world. It does not mean that we hold the reins of world government. They are in the hands of God. But we have our place in their exercise. In his supreme omnipotence (all powerful) and omniscience (all knowing) God wills to share his life with us.

God will rectify and amend our prayer in his answering of it. It is not as if our prayer is the certain and secure thing, and God's answer unsure and uncertain. It is the opposite. It is we who are challenged in prayer, not God.

By prayer, therefore, we both express our trust in God's providence, and discover how our own wills are to be more aligned with his sovereign and loving will for us.

So it was with Naomi in her prayer, here, that of trusting commitment of the future to the Lord's hands. As she thinks of her daughters-in-law, and their needs, she prays that the Lord, the covenant God would show kindness to them.

Ruth 1: 8-9. "May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you find rest in the home of another husband."

The pain of partings

The weeping expressed the grief, the grief that Orpah and Ruth felt in having to choose between their love for Naomi, and their hope of motherhood in a second marriage. Initially they both refused to go home, but on Naomi's insistence Orpah was persuaded to leave.

Naomi's reasoning with her daughters-in-law had in mind the practice of levirate marriage. A custom of the ancient Jews by which a man is obliged to marry his brother's widow in order to raise up a child of the dead man. Naomi stresses the complete impossibility of providing Orpah and Ruth with the fathers for their children.

We shall see, the situation is far from impossible, for in the providence of God, and through the actions of a kinsman-redeemer Ruth is to be given both a husband and a son. But for the present, that hope is nowhere to be seen. And Orpah is persuaded to go home. She kisses Naomi goodbye and presumably moves back to Moab to find herself another husband there.

The grief was not only that of the daughters-in-law. She was being torn from Ruth and Orpah. Despite the pain - even anger - Naomi still holds on to the fact that what she has received is somehow from the Lord's hand. What is impressive is her truthfulness of her life before God. There is no hiding her feelings, no pretence that her anger is not there. Her faith in God's providence is certain although what she feels is very painful. We might not enjoy what God is doing to us but God's purpose of love is unquestionable.

Many of us have all but forgotten how to mourn. The time will come when the Christian affirmation of hope of life in Christ becomes the reality of the new heaven and the new earth, when "***there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain,***" but there are still times this side of heaven when we will weep and lament before our sorrow is turned into joy.

The Christian faith has, of course, made obsolete much of the prolonged and painful public lamenting over the dead which was customary at times in ancient Israel. There is still grief at the loss of a friend and at the intrusion of death into life, but for the Christian he is sustained by the hope of the resurrection of the dead. But let us not pretend that death does not hurt, and that grief may not be expressed. Sorrow is real and deep hurt is removed by tears and God's grace.

What does faith in God mean in times of affliction? Later we can look back on suffering and sometimes discern the good that has come from it. Sometimes not. The 'dark face' of God - can be the only pathway to growth and maturity of character. At the time it does not feel like that. Naomi's experience bears witness to this, the essence of trust, throughout the experience of affliction, is humbly to bow beneath the hand of God from whom we feel the blow, in the firm belief that - despite all appearances - it is the hand of the loving Father.

Ruth's faith

Ruth we are told, 'clung' to Naomi. This verb is the word of committed faithful 'unity' in a deep personal relationship - such as used by Adam to Eve in the garden "***a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife.***" It is the committed faithfulness which God desires of his covenant people in response to his initiative of saving grace.

Ruth insists on staying with Naomi. Our author here gives us Ruth's words, her classic and beautiful affirmation of faithfulness, determination and loving commitment. Ruth wills to share Naomi's future; her travel, her home, her faith. A promise of committed faithfulness in life and beyond life, "***where you die I will die.***" Ruth is prepared to take on her lips the name of Naomi's covenant God, Jehovah, the Lord, in a firm assertion of faith in him which underlies her oath.

Ruth 1: 16-17. "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

It was precisely Naomi's faith through the uncertainty which pointed Ruth to the Lord. How often the Lord uses the experiences of his people, especially in times of affliction and difficulty in pointing others to himself. Paul reminds us of this in:

Philippians 1: 12-14. "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brother in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."

Naomi or Mara

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to return with her to Bethlehem she acquiesced. When they arrived the women were stirred into questioning. Naomi had been away for many years. She had gone with her husband and two sons, and come back now a widow with a widowed daughter-in-law. When the question is asked "***Can this be Naomi?***" Naomi replies "***Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.***" Naomi means Pleasant, Mara means Bitter. She believes the bitter experiences she has coped with were from the hand of the Almighty.

The Almighty

This title of God translates from the Hebrew word Shaddai, its original meaning is unclear. Some authors suggest that it relates to the qualities of durability, solidity and trustworthiness.

In ***Genesis 17:1*** when God confronts the ninety-nine years old Abram with the promise of a child he reveals himself as "***I am God Almighty.***" He is here the God who can transfer man's helplessness into blessing.

In Genesis 43:14 elderly Jacob agrees reluctantly with his distressed sons that they should return to Egypt with their young brother, back to the unrecognised Joseph: **“may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man.”** ‘Shaddai’ here speaks of the hope of God’s protection at a time of uncertainty.

In **Genesis 49:25** Jacob’s prophecy about his sons speaks of Joseph’s blessings in life because of the Almighty. After thirteen years in prison Joseph is raised to the premiership of Egypt.

Such a blessing is characteristic of Shaddai.

Shaddai is the God who is at his best when man is at his worst. It is as though Naomi is saying: You can see the bitterness I have experienced, the famine, the bereavements, the questionings, the partings, the apparent hopelessness; but I know God as Shadaai, and I can leave the explanation, and even the responsibility for this bitterness with him.

Was Naomi blaming God for the evil that had happened to her? No. It is precisely the way a person of faith can learn to cope with the pain and uncertainty of much of life’s troubles. It is the person who knows his God as the Almighty who can accept the apparent meaninglessness of earthly suffering as part of God’s providence and cope with it if placed in God’s hands. Naomi knows the Almighty with whom she can leave her bitterness is the same Almighty who brought her home.

There is an illustration of the tangled threads on the back of a tapestry, pointing out that much of this life’s experiences in this world seems to us very often to be a tangle of unrelated colours, loose ends and unravelable knots. It is only when the tapestry’s other side is visible that those same threads are seen to spell out ‘God’s love’. We may well not see the other side the ‘second side’ being written alongside and around the human story which we can read sometimes so painfully. But faith is God’s assurance that such another side is there, and that in his love, even the pains will have a meaning.

But it is in Christ’s own person that the fullest revelation of this truth becomes clear. The New Testament discloses him as God’s suffering servant, as the Lamb of God on whom the sins and pains of the world are laid. In Christ, and in particular in Christ’s life laid down in the death of the cross, God himself is entering into and sharing the depths of this world’s suffering and sin.

In the first chapter of Ruth, Naomi has shared with us her faith in God. A faith that has shone out in contrast to the darkness of her troubles.

Lesson Three

Grace and gratitude

Ruth 2: 1-13

The secret

Whereas most detective stories keep their secret to the last page, the writer here lets us into a secret right at the start of chapter 2.

Ruth 2:1. "Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz."

At this stage neither Naomi nor Ruth know that within reach of their home lived a man of considerable wealth and influence who was related to them, a kinsman of Naomi's late husband.

Chapter 2 is the day in Ruth's life in which she meets Boaz. At the end of the day after work she tells Naomi what has happened. Only then does the true significance of her meeting become apparent to her.

Ruth 2:20 "The Lord bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, that man is our closest relative he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."

Only then did Ruth realise that the meeting was no accident but part of the caring provision of God.

We are told about Boaz in the first verse; when later Ruth meets Boaz in what seems to her to be purely accidental we are in the know. Behind the apparent chances of the ordinariness of day-to-day encounters, God is expressing his providential rule and care.

Who was Boaz, and why is this information so significant for us? In the first place, Boaz is a kinsman of Elimelech's family. In the second place, Boaz is a man of standing. We will look at both in turn.

A kinsman

The crucial importance of Boaz's family link will become clearer in due course, but it is important for us to know of this relationship, since it is only because of this kinship with Naomi that Boaz fulfils the role in which he finds himself later in the story. By 'family' the Old Testament means a much wider network of relationships than our concept of the modern nuclear family. Jacob's family included three generations. Servants and even the resident alien were included in the family, as were widows and orphans who lived under the protection of the head of the house. The family in ancient Israel stood at the centre of connected relationships: to God, to Israel, to the land.

The family was the basic unit of Israel's social and kinship structure. It was the basic unit also and beneficiary of Israel's system of land tenure, because the land, ultimately

owned by God, was given to families as an inheritance. Family solidarity was extremely strong in ancient Israel, and members of the wider family had obligations to help and protect one another when need arose.

Once we were far away from God but through Jesus we have been adopted into his family. This is how Paul expresses it in his letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 2: 17-19. "He came and preached to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household."

Of course, we are not a redeemed theocratic nation as Israel was, but we can still aim to produce a society which reflects in some sense, the triangle of relationship within which the family was set in the Old Testament.

A man of standing

The second thing we learn about Boaz is that he was a man of standing. The expression sometimes means 'a mighty man of valour', 'a mighty warrior', or 'a man of substance'. It also carries the sense of moral worth. In Boaz, therefore, we are introduced to a man of integrity, influence and means. All of these factors will be important in the role he is to play in the continuing story of Naomi and Ruth.

As it turned out

One of the most important features of faith in God's providence is that it teaches us that even our accidents are within his care.

Ruth unaware of Boaz at this stage, takes advantage of one of the generous provisions of the law of Israel, that concerning gleaning. Out of concern for the helpless and poor the Levitical laws required reapers in the fields at harvest time to leave the edges of the grain fields to be collected by the needy. The reapers were not to go back for the grain they had missed or dropped.

This poses for us the question to what extent the economic priorities of the countries that share the Christian inheritance of faith are placed under a similar obligation for economic provision for the underprivileged and poorer areas of God's world. A concern for the just distribution of earth's resources is no soft option for Christian people.

Ruth we are told '***as it turned out found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz***'. Here we have yet another reinforcement of our author's faith in the gracious providence of God. We know this was no accident. What to Ruth was sheer coincidence in an unplanned set of circumstances, we understand as part of the outworking of God's gracious care.

We have said a lot about God's sovereignty, we must now rescue ourselves from the deterministic view of God which sometimes accompanies such faith. We are not pawns in some divine chess game, or puppets on strings worked by some celestial puppeteer. We are left with the paradox that human choices and responsibilities are very much our concern, and that the outworking of our faith - with fear and trembling - is very much

work that we do, precisely because God is at work within us ***‘to will and to act according to his good purpose’***.

Sometimes it is imagined that God’s grace is some extra power over and above human strength that counteracts the power of original sin. And of course there is some truth in that. But the primary emphasis to hold on to in our understanding of grace, is that ‘grace’ is a personal relationship word. Grace above all means a ‘gracious relationship’ between God and us. When ‘Noah found grace’ in the eyes of the Lord; the truth is that God graciously found Noah, and invited him to share a gracious relationship with himself. So God’s grace does not ‘act on us’ in a forceful way to remove our freedom. Rather God’s gracious relationship creates a freedom within us.

Repay and reward

For the remainder of this lesson we will consider Boaz’ prayer.

Ruth 2:12. “May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

When Boaz prays to God to repay Ruth, he is asking God to pay her back for her devoted service in the context of his covenant relationship with the Lord. The word repay is used in a number of different ways in the Old Testament: to pay your debts; to make good, to restore, to make complete again and to make peace. The word ‘reward’ is infrequently used in the Old Testament where in each case it means wages.

Boaz’ prayer is that God should ‘make up what is due’ to Ruth for all the pain she has suffered in her self-giving to Naomi - may she be ‘paid sufficiently’ and ‘restored to a sense of completeness and peace’ once again.

What are we today to make of this concern for ‘payments’ and ‘rewards’? Should we be looking for what we might get out of it? Does Boaz’ faith point to a belief that one needs to earn God’s favour by self-giving service? Surely we are justified by grace through faith, not by works? But then the New Testament also seems to have a lot to say about rewards.

Matthew 5:12. “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”

Jesus teaches that the Father who sees his children giving to the needy, and praying and fasting in secret, will reward them. Even a cup of cold water will not go unrewarded; and God is described as the ‘rewarder’ of those who seek him.

It helps, perhaps, to distinguish what have been called ‘arbitrary’ rewards from ‘proper’ rewards. Arbitrary rewards have no direct relationship to the behaviour for which they are given. There is nothing wrong in being rewarded arbitrarily (like being paid money for an oil painting you have created).

By contrast ‘proper’ rewards are the direct and integrally related consequence of behaviour (like the satisfaction of being able to paint after hard practice). Thus the proper reward for giving to the needy, prayer and fasting is the relationship with God which these activities are intended to express. So when Jesus urges that good deeds

should be done without concern for reward, he does also imply that the 'proper' rewards for goodness can be left to God.

Luke 14: 12-14 "Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

The enjoyment of the rewards of good character, from which the fruit of good actions derive, is the same as the enjoyment of God himself. An enriched relationship with God is the 'proper reward' of loving obedience to him in response to his gracious initiative to love. The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount reiterates the very same truth. Blessedness - the joy of the Christian life is found in righteous living.

Lesson Four

A place in the family

Ruth 2: 14-23

Law that safeguards love

There is no place for legalism in the faith of the people of God. A cold adherence to the strict letter of the law takes law outside the covenant of grace, at the heart of which is a relationship of generous love, which law is intended to safeguard and, through the exercise of obedience, to deepen and enrich.

Ruth's needs are more than abundantly met. Boaz offers her freshly roasted ears of the newly picked grain until '*she ate all she wanted and had some left over*' - enough left over to offer to Naomi when she got home. Boaz told her to glean even among the sheaves, whereas the law mentioned only the edges of the field. Boaz even tells his young men too '*pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up!*' Boaz' generous response goes beyond the strict requirement of the law.

In Israel's religion the law was never an external code merely requiring legalistic subservience. The law has to be understood within the covenant relationship, within the total ordering of peoples lives. It was the separation of the law as a category distinct from the covenant relationship, particularly in the period between the two testaments which led to the development of the legalistic approach to the Old Testament seen in the Pharisaic teaching condemned by Jesus. The primary commandment of the law is that of love for God, and each individual ruling is only to be understood as the will of God in so far as it is an overall injunction of love, by which God claims man for his own - not just in this or that particular obligation, but in man's whole personal being. The laws are to be understood as the application and practice of the primary command of love.

What we are seeing in Boaz is an indication of his gracious generosity which, by going beyond the letter of the law concerning gleaning demonstrated the spiritual concern for which the law was framed, namely, that love for God is expressed in care and provision for the poor. By doing so Boaz is sharing something of the character of God. A God made more fully known to us in Christ.

Generous love

After her days hard work, Ruth beats out the gleanings to leave the edible barley, and was able to take back home an enormous ephah (nearly 22 litres - it was the name of a vessel large enough to hold a person) to her mother-in-law's evident surprise and delight. Naomi exclaims "*The Lord bless him! He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead. This man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.*"

The word translated 'kindness' is the word 'hesed' in Hebrew. It speaks of the warmth of loyal love combined with brotherly comradeship and a sense of committed and reliable faithfulness. The word frequently used to describe God's covenanted loving-faithfulness to his people.

The character of 'hesed' is most clearly seen in the Lord's willingness to allow his love to continue in mercy towards his people, even when their sin threatened to disrupt and even destroy the covenant relationship altogether. This builds into the concept of loyal love the sense also of an undeserving mercy. Nowhere is this more richly illustrated than in the life story of Hosea in which the prophet's continuing love for his adulterous wife is to parallel the faithful and merciful love of God for Israel, even though they had turned to other gods.

Hosea 11: 1-4 "When Israel was a child, I love him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; they did not realise it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness with ties of love. I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them."

The 'hesed' which is part of the 'matter of course' of a covenanted relationship now becomes transformed into a rich gift of grace, given to men who have no claim upon it. This miraculous quality of love is seen in the exalted God in which he seeks communion with man.

This 'hesed' this merciful and gracious lovingkindness, she sees in the generosity of Boaz to Ruth. Earlier she had held on to God's grace through the suffering of bereavement. Now she experiences the grace of his provision through the generosity of a wealthy farmer.

Agencies of grace

Naomi sees the gracious hand of God acting through the gracious actions of men. As we said before there is no sense that the grace and kindness of God over-ride human agency, but that is often through human agency (in this case Boaz) that God's gracious kindness is received.

Paul speaking about grace in his second letter to the Corinthians tells his readers he wants them to know about the grace of God which he describes as ***'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.'*** **2 Corinthians 8:9**. In this verse he is talking about money but then he goes on to teach the Corinthians about social equality. The grace of God in this context is seen in the generous behaviour of the churches of Macedonia.

2 Corinthians 8: 2-4 "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."

He then urges the Corinthians to 'excel in this grace of giving also'.

2 Corinthians 8: 13-14. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality.

To believe in God's grace commits us to hard work in his service for one another. And this service will include concern about equality in the distribution of resources. There is no sense, in the book of Ruth, of those in power using the underprivileged as political pawns for personal gain. On the contrary, the mood is rather that faith in the gracious provision of God is matched by a concern to express that grace in personal dealings with others, and in particular, with care for the disadvantage.

Lesson Five

The kinsman-redeemer

The levir and the goel

In this lesson we will step away from the text of Ruth to examine two features of the laws and life of ancient Israel: the 'levir' and the 'goel'.

The first the levir (a Latin word translated from the Hebrew for 'brother-in-law') concerns the family duties which speaks of 'doing the part of the next of kin'. The levirate regulates marriage customs when the man of the home has died.

The second the 'goel', is a near kinsman who acts as redeemer of persons or property. The verb g'l means to 'buy back' or 'redeem' but fundamentally its meaning is 'to protect'.

These two family institutions are linked together at several points in the narrative of Ruth so we need to be clear in our minds what these customs involve.

The levir

The levirate refers to an ancient marriage institution in which an in-law is involved. If a man dies without children the 'name' of the dead man is perpetuated through the widows marriage with another man (for example the man's brother), and through her having his children 'for' the dead man.

The law we are referring to is found in *Deuteronomy 25: 5-6*.

"If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside of the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel."

The next part of the law verses 7-10 makes provision for the fact that the brother may not wish to perform his duty, and for the humiliating treatment he is to receive if he refuses.

This law could be described as a 'duty of love'. If a man after having contracted a marriage, dies without sons, then he dies entirely. It is this blotting out of life which is to be avoided. His nearest of kin, the brother, must perform this office of love in order to protect him from extermination. The wife, whose object in life is to bear him a son in whom his life is resurrected, must be able to do her duty towards him.

The duties of the levirate in the story of Ruth devolve on the next of kin whoever he may be. This is why Naomi rejoices to find that Boaz is the man who helped Ruth - because 'he is one of our kinsman-redeemers'. He could quite properly be expected to

act as levir for Ruth and make her the mother of a son of Elimelech. But there is a twist in the story, there is a kinsman nearer than Boaz. But in the providence of God this nearest of kin is unable to fulfil the duties of levir, so the joyous task reverts to Boaz.

The goel

Amongst the people of God there was a strong sense of family solidarity. The members of the family had a duty to care for and protect each other. There were certain situations defined by law in the institution of the goal in ancient Israel, in which these obligations had to be expressed in action.

We mentioned that the goel is the 'protector' - a near kinsman whose duty it is in certain circumstances to act as 'redeemer' in situations of family need. Four situations are described in the Pentateuch.

- 1) If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. If his next of kin cannot help him or he does not save sufficient means to redeem his property he must wait until the year of jubilee when his property shall be returned to him.
- 2) If your brother becomes poor and sells himself, one of his near relatives may redeem him or a near kinsman belonging to his family may redeem him, or if he grows rich he may redeem himself.
- 3) The third circumstance is the most serious aspect of family solidarity: that of blood vengeance. The blood of a murdered kinsman must be avenged by the death of him who shed it, or the death of one of his family.

Israelite legislation does not allow compensation of money, alleging for this a religious motive; blood which is shed defiles the land in which God dwells, and must be expiated by the blood of him who shed it,

- 4) The goel (the protector) could act as a trustee in such payments as were due in order to make restitution for a wrong caused by the sin of a kinsman. If there is no person to whom restitution may be made for the wrong it shall go to the Lord for the priest.

The Lord the goel

In the book of Exodus when God made himself known to Moses as the Lord, and commissioned him to negotiate with Pharaoh for the release of the Israelites slaves from Egypt, he told Moses:

Exodus 6: 6-8 "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.'"

The central focus of the calling of the people to be God's covenant people, and his promise of a new hope in a new land, is the act of redemption from Egypt. The Lord is their kinsman, their redeemer!

Later we read:

Isaiah 41:14. "For I myself will help you," declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."

Jeremiah 50:34 "Yet their Redeemer is strong: the Lord Almighty is his name."

Psalms 19:14 "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Psalms 69:18 "Come near and rescue me; redeem me because of my foes."

Psalms 103:4 "who redeemed your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion."

God is then understood as the sort of God who stands by the oppressed, who calls a people to be his own covenant family by rescuing them from slavery, who with his mighty arm liberates the captives and offers them a new freedom and hope. This is the character which is to be seen also in the kinsman-redeemer of Israel - the one who by his actions on behalf of those in need is demonstrating within family relationships something of the character of their covenant God.

Redemption costs

The primary emphasis of the word 'goel' is family obligation, particularly with respect to human need. The word also carries the sense of the payment of price. This implies the idea of effort and cost on the part of the redeemer for the sake of the kinsman. In the passages in which the Lord is referred to as goel, there is often implied something of the costliness of redemption.

Isaiah 52: 9-10 "Burst into song of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations."

The redemption of God's people is costly. It cannot be said that God paid to an Egyptian oppressor any price for the redemption of his people. On the other hand the idea of the exertion of a mighty force, the idea that the 'redemption' costs much, is everywhere present. The force may be represented by divine might, or love, or self-sacrifice,

A future and a hope

One of the purposes of the book of Ruth is to expand the meaning of 'redemption'.

In the actions of Boaz as goel we see foreshadowed the saving work of Jesus Christ, his later descendant. As Boaz had the right of redemption and yet was under no obligation to intervene on Ruth's behalf, so it was with Christ. As Boaz, seeing the plight of the

poor widows, came to their rescue because his life was governed by the Lord and his laws, so also of the Messiah it is prophesied that his life would be governed by the law of God and that he would deal justly with the poor and with those who were oppressed.

Paul uses the 'kinship model' of the atonement in Christ in Romans chapters 5-8. Christ is associated closely with us as Boaz is with Ruth, being for '*in the likeness of sinful man*'. He pays the price of redemption demanded by the old master - his own death. There could be no other price if he was fully to associate himself with us in our position under the control of sin and death. But such a Goel could not be held by the power of death. He rose from death, bringing with him those with whom he had associated himself. We were buried with himunited with himcrucified with him and so we will also be 'alive to God in Christ Jesus'.

God's object in all of this is: "***Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.***" A new family has been created by the intervention of our great kinsman-redeemer. We are adopted into God's family and so are children of God - and fellow heirs with Christ. And with us, the whole created order will be set free from its' bondage to decay, and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Christ our Goel, like Boaz to Ruth, is related to us, able and willing to redeem.

Lesson Six

Faith active in love

Ruth 3: 1-18

Naomi's initiative

The initiative in the narrative now stays firmly with Naomi. Her concern is for Ruth's welfare. She therefore wanted Ruth to marry again. She has expressed this before back in Moab, but there the prospects of marriage had been extremely remote. Now the news that Boaz met Ruth has changed the despair into a new hope for Boaz is a close relative.

Naomi saw the way forward in planning for Ruth to ask Boaz to act for her as levir. He was a near kinsman; they will ask him to help and protect them. Would he be willing to 'do the part of the next of kin' by entering a levirate marriage with Ruth, and so father a son for Ruth's dead husband? The time had come for careful preparations to that end, and Naomi takes steps to discover how a meeting between Boaz and Ruth can be staged. Tonight Boaz is on duty at the threshing floor; this is the moment for action.

That evening Boaz will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor. From late afternoon until near sunset a wind rises from the sea. Boaz will be at the threshing floor on the hillside outside the village at that time, throwing the grain trodden out by the animals, against the wind for the husks to blow away,

Ruth is to wash and anoint herself, and put on a covering to prevent herself from being recognised. She is to prepare herself 'as a bride prepares for her marriage'?

Naomi is preparing Ruth to make clear to Boaz that she wants him to marry her. Then Ruth is to go down to the threshing floor and wait until Boaz has finished his meal. She is to make careful note of the place where he lies down to sleep, so that later on she can go and lie near to him. All the preparations for the night-time visit, the place, the way of approach, the timing, all are geared to making it clear that Ruth is asking Boaz for levirate marriage.

Ruth's courageous loyalty

Obediently, Ruth did just as her mother-in-law had told her. It is not spelled out here what motivated Ruth beyond this committed loyalty to Naomi. As Boaz later remarked, there may well have been much more attractive younger men available to Ruth than this old bachelor, had she chosen to 'go after' them. But Ruth has come to learn how important a husband's inheritance and a male heir were to the people of God in those times; how important the inheritance of Elimelech and Mahlon were to Naomi. Ruth knows that Naomi is too old to bear children and Orpah had gone back to Moab the important duty now falls to her. Quite apart from any personal wish for a husband and family, which we can well imagine Ruth felt, she knows that she is now part of the covenant family of God and she is willing to take her part in the levirate custom for the Lord's sake and for that of the inheritance of one of his people.

Harvest time was also feasting time, and after the party, Boaz lays down to sleep, observed by and as yet unrecognised Ruth. When he was asleep, she crept up to him and lay at his feet - a place of humility. Some time passed. Then in the middle of the night Boaz is startled and he turns to discover a woman lying at his feet.

We can imagine the tense whisper, "Who are you?", "What do you want?" Ruth then makes herself known with characteristic humility: "***I am your servant Ruth***" but why was she there? She then asks her crucial question: "***Will you spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer, you are my goel?***" This was a delicate request for marriage.

The 'spreading of the corner of the garment' is referred to in the passage from Ezekiel to which he referred to the Lord's love for Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 16:8 "Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you become mine."

Boaz certainly understood Ruth's request in terms of a desire for marriage, as we can gather from his response. "***This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier; You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you as you ask.***"

Boaz' gracious generosity

Boaz expresses his care for Ruth not only in his response to her question but in other ways too. She is not to go home on her own in the middle of the night. When she does go in the dim light of dawn, she is to be careful to keep her visit secret, he wants to give no impression that anything improper has happened. Furthermore he gives a large gift of six measures of barley for Ruth to share with Naomi, confirming Boaz' goodwill to both women.

The grace of the redeemer

In the story we have come to understand more clearly the providence of God. His overruling of events, how there is a second story being written by and through the events of human choices and circumstances. His special grace through the circumstances of suffering to the resources of his comfort. And how God made adequate material provision through the generosity of others. Finally, we are introduced to the redeemer in the person of Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, through whom the benefits in large measure came.

From our New Testament perspective we can also see how much of God's gracious providence to us is linked to the person of Jesus Christ. It is in him that God has set forth his purposes for the world to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer, brings with him the forgiveness of our sins, and all other benefits of his love, calling us to be members of his family entering with us into the pains of our suffering and bearing them with us, encouraging us to trust our Father in heaven to give us day by day our daily bread, and welcoming us ultimately to the wedding banquet.

Law and love

There is a tendency among some Christians to polarise law and love. Law is thought to be the characteristic of the Old Testament, and love the radical new proclamation of the New. No such polarity exists. In fact it is the Old Testament texts of 'to love God' and 'love our neighbour' that Jesus hangs all the law and the prophets.

Deuteronomy 6:4. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Matthew 22: 37-40. "Jesus replied: "Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments."

In the book of Ruth, Boaz is a law-abiding person. For him the law gives guidance for living as a person within the covenant family of God. But for him, law is not a legal code only, it is a reminder that he is part of the family of the covenant of God. Law for Boaz is fatherly instruction from God, not a moralistic legal code. God's law is guidance in loving.

When Jesus tells his hearers that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it, he surely is understanding it not in terms of a legalistic code, but as a fatherly instruction of the covenant God to his children. The law is guidance in loving, and gives particular illustrations of the meaning of loving obedience in certain situations. To concentrate on 'love' alone soon robs the word of any content. It can be used as the cover for any and all behaviour which 'seems good' or 'feels good'. There is no guard against sinful self-indulgence, or plain stupidity. To concentrate on 'law' alone, outside the covenant context of redemption and a glad response to grace, soon transforms law into legalism, morality into moralism, and the liberty of faith into the struggle to keep the rules - a bondage from which Christ has set us free.

Lesson Seven

The redemption and the joy

Ruth 4: 1-12

Love beyond law

The focus of attention now moves to the city gate, the centre of city life. Here the townspeople gather for conversation and administrative justice. Here the poor wait for justice and business is transacted. It is at the gate the elders of society meet. Today Boaz goes to the gate on the look out for the next of kin of whom he spoke to Ruth.

When the next of kin appeared, Boaz called to him and urged him to join him. Then he called together a group of elders to act as witnessing judges of a transaction he was about to propose. The elders would validate contracts and trade agreements which conferred binding authority on the transaction.

Not all the details regarding the exact ownership of the land is certain so we have to make a guess. Boaz first talks about land purchase. ***“Naomi who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech.”*** This is the first time we have heard of land.

What is obvious is that Boaz had spoken to Naomi about the land and his plan to marry Ruth. Together they decide a way round the dilemma. Naomi’s nearest kin is at first keen to purchase the land that she had the titles too. Did he think that now Naomi was past child-bearing age there was no chance of a levirate child being born, to whom the property would revert. He therefore thinks the land would be his, and for his heirs, and so agrees to redeem it.

Boaz then informs the next of kin: it is no longer Naomi whom you would have to marry but her daughter-in-law Ruth. ***“On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man’s widow.”*** It is obviously accepted that Ruth, of marriageable and child-bearing age, would replace Naomi in the Levirate responsibility of raising a child to Elimelech.

The kinsman wanted the land but not Ruth or the responsibility to raise a child who would then be heir to the land he purchased. Boaz had engineered this play, mentioning the land first and Ruth afterwards.

Motivated by his own love for Ruth and his willingness and ability to give his money for Ruth’s sake and that of the name of Elimelech. Boaz has cleverly placed the nearest kinsman in a situation in which he can do nothing other than offer right of redemption to him, Boaz the next in line.

Witness a marriage

The levirate duty did not always imply full marriage. We do not know whether the near kinsman who has just expressed his inability to act as goal would have entered into full marriage with Ruth, or only acted as her levir until a child was born. He may already

have been married himself, with an inheritance to safeguard for the sake of his own children. Boaz was possibly childless, probably a bachelor or widower. He was certainly an older man of wealth and influence.

We can imagine the scene, not just the elders but all the people called into witness what is going on. There is a note of celebration in the air, to judge from the people's response. The ceremony of the shoe was enacted. By this means a transaction (in this case the transfer of rights from the kinsman to Boaz) was validated: one of the parties removed his sandle and gave it to the other. By this means the kinsman abandoned his rights of redemption in favour of Boaz. All the people are involved in the celebration.

This is an aspect to marriage which should not be lost. In our day, marriage is coming to be thought of by some only as a private alliance between two people, to be made (and even terminated) as they wish, by their private choice. But society has always had an interest in the formation of a new pair bond and the growth of a new family unit in society. Despite the very different cultural surroundings, expectancies of marriage, and social relationships between the sexes, the covenant model of marriage in both the Old and New Testaments carries with it the fact that 'marriage' is to be understood both in personal and relational terms, when we focus on the couple and see their place in the wider social group.

One of the three bases on which the marriage covenant stands, as expounded in simplest terms in Genesis 2:24 is ***"a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."*** The 'leaving' is a public declaration that a marriage is being made. It is the occasion on which the couple together receive the public support of their friends and society in a new social unit which they are creating. It is the occasion on which the couple also accept their vocation to be a new unit in society - to live out in society a relationship which in some way mirrors God's covenant relationship with his people.

In one of Bonhoeffer's sermons he says this:

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It is a higher dignity and power, for it is God's holy ordinance..... In your love you see only the heaven of your happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is something more than personal, it is a status, an office ... that joins you together in the sight of God and man.

Today's questions, "Why get married?" "Why bother with a piece of paper?" Are to be answered in terms of responsibility to society, and a recognition that our equivalent of "the elders and all those at the gate" have a proper interest in the formation of a new family group.

Public witness is always an aspect of covenant-making. And the social importance of public witness retains this aspect of the meaning of marriage. But there is a personal value here also. The public witness serves among other things as a buttress in a marriage against disintegration in those times when the relationship is under strain. It is a constant reminder that promises were made, obligations entered into and prayers for grace and resources asked. The vows were not simply a private matter, but publicly made and publicly witnessed. A sense of accountability to the wider Christian fellowship

helps us to maintain our promises and acts to support us in the harder times when our commitment to loving faithfulness is put to the test.

Prayer for blessing

The immediate response of the people to this demonstration of redeeming love is twofold to witness and pray.

Through the self-sacrificing act of Boaz, Ruth has been established as belonging within the people of God. Boaz has expressed in practice himself what he believed to be true of God's actions towards his people. This is always the calling of the people of God; people who are redeemed are to be the agents through whom others find redemption.

This witness is coupled with prayer for God's blessing on the new family. How much this little book pulsates with the life of prayer!

1:8 Naomi's response to the news from Bethlehem that the famine had ended and her daughters-in-law should return home.

"May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me."

2:4 The routine greeting Boaz offered his workers and their reply.

"The Lord be with you!" "The Lord bless you!" They called back."

2:12 Boaz' generous welcome to Ruth to glean in his field.

"May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

2:20. Naomi's prayer in thanksgiving as Ruth returns home with her news about Boaz at the end of the day.

"The Lord bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead."

3:10. Boaz responds to Ruth's night time visit.

"The Lord bless you, my daughter."

Now all the people respond with prayer to the transaction seeking God's blessing on Boaz and Ruth. Every aspect of life, from misery to joy, from the routine to the extraordinary, daily work and social activity, as well as the private moments, are lived in the faith that God is there and God cares.

They have been witnesses to an act of redeeming love. They now seek God's blessing. And their concern for Boaz and for his new wife and family is threefold.

The wife. ***"May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachael and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel."***

From Rachael and Leah and Jacob's concubines came the whole nation of Israel. May Ruth, too, become the ancestress of a famous race. May she have many descendants within the family and purpose of God.

The husband. ***"May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem."***

May Boaz himself be enriched through this marriage and his offspring. Not only are we concerned with the maintaining of the name of Elimelech through this marriage but that Boaz' own family name will be established.

The family-to-be ***"May your family be like the family of Perez."***

Perez was the son of a levirate relationship. That between Judah and Tamar. The parallel to this situation is clear. Perez was one of the ancestors of the Bethlehemites who descended from Judah. Perez was certainly one of Boaz' ancestors. The people prayed that Boaz will, like his ancestor, have a numerous and renowned family of descendants.

Lesson Eight

We have a history

Ruth 4:13:22

One flesh

The primary biblical picture of marriage is that of covenant. God's covenant relations with his people are described in marriage language; human married life derives its meaning from, and is to be patterned on, God's covenant relations with his people, Christ's with his church.

We can discern three main elements to the marriage covenant; the promise of committed love between husband and wife; the public covenant-making by which a new family unit is created in society; and the developing personal communion between the partners in relationship, which sexual union symbolises and deepens.

The writer of Genesis 2:24 expresses this in his comment of the creation of woman as partner to the man: ***“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”*** For Boaz, all three parts of the marriage covenant are now together: his love for Ruth, the public witness of their wedding, and now the sexual union.

In the thinking of our author and other biblical writers, physical sexual union belongs within such a context of a committed, loving, and publicly known relationship. This was not only to safeguard the rights of children. It was part of the meaning of 'one flesh' - that developing understanding which we can trace through both Old and New Testaments that marriage means a complete distinctive partnership of one man with one woman for life, symbolised by and deepened through the sexual relationship.

The gift of life

From the prayer which the elders have just offered, it is clear that they regarded children as a gift from God. This is underlined by our author's comments here. He does not simply relate the human events: ***Ruth 4: 13 “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went with her and she gave him a son.”*** He joins these two events with this: ***“and the Lord enabled her to conceive.”***

If there is one theme more than any other which dominates the book of Ruth, it is that of the over-ruling providence of God, and our human dependence on him. God is the source of life, and its blessings, are a gift from his hand. And particularly here, the conception of a child is understood as a gift from God.

From emptiness to joy

The joyful outcome of the story: the son born to Ruth who is also therefore born to Naomi in the family of Elimelech, is again surrounded with prayers of thankfulness to God. It is this prayer which brings the story full circle, and proclaims again the providential rule and care of God. The focus is now back on Naomi. She left Moab bereft of her husband and her sons. She was greeted in Bethlehem by the women who saw her grief and heard her bitterness. They now share her joy: ***“Praise to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer.”***

Again the sense of family solidarity is emphasised. The child was born to Ruth, but he will also be to Naomi: ***“He will restore your life and sustain you in your old age.”*** As the levirate son for Mahlon, he is heir to Elimelech. Through him Elimelech’s family name has not died out from that day to this. Through him God’s purposes were carried forward. Ruth and Naomi are given a future and a hope. But the purpose of God on the wider canvas of world history has also been accomplished, as we shall see. The child is called Obed.

The sense of history

The Bible seems to have a lot of genealogies, and genealogies are often boring. They serve, however, to remind us of one very important fact which the Bible insists that we should not forget: our interconnectedness as human beings with generations past. Each conception is a gift from God. But it is a gift within a context. At the level of our genetic inheritance and physical descent, we are in many respects the produce of our history. We are who we are to some significant degree because of who our parents and grandparents were. Our history matters.

It is precisely this sense of history which is captured by an otherwise boring, and apparently tacked on, list of names at the end of this chapter. ***“This, then, is the family line of”*** is the formula found elsewhere, in ***Genesis 2:4***. ***“This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.”*** ***Genesis 5:1***. ***“This is the written account of Adam’s line.”*** etc., It indicates the sense of a developing story.

So from Perez, one of the twin sons of Judah and Tamar, through various generations (some of which have probably been skipped over by the author), we come to Boaz, and so to Obed. Obed was the Father of Jesse, who was himself the father of Israel’s greatest King.

The book of Ruth contains, as it were, the inner side, the spiritual moral background of the genealogies which play so significant a part in Israel’s history. The book contains a historical picture from the family life of the ancestors of David, intended to show how the ancestors of this great King walked upright before God and man in piety and singleness of heart.

The historical continuity of the covenant purposes of God in the covenant people of God, from great Father Abraham to the saving events of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and beyond into the life and interconnectedness of the family of the Christian church is all brought to mind for us in the brief reference to the genealogy.

We do well to remember the New Testament understanding of the Christian church as the historical covenant community, the historical process of God's sovereign providential rule. This should serve to deliver us from an over concentration on individualistic faith, and remind us of our covenant links with believers in the past. It is to help us understand our Bibles are produced within the context of the covenant community; it will help us also to understand the traditions of the church - the historical communion of saints - as sharing in that same historical covenant context in its attempts to understand and apply biblical truth. The covenant family of God spans the centuries. It is the family we are invited to belong.

The whole life of the nation of Israel was bound up with their King. And the importance of kingship in Israel was tied to the life of the archetypal King David. And his life, in terms of physical descent, was linked to the story of a Moabite girl gleaning in a barley field many miles from home; to a caring mother-in-law and a loving kinsman; to a night-time conversation at the threshing floor; to the willingness of a wealthy farmer to go beyond the requirements of the law in his care for the needy. In short it is the ordinariness of the events of lives of ordinary people that God is working his purpose out.

When Christ our Saviour was born of David's line, in that same Bethlehem, he was born into a family of ordinary people. And they, too, by their willing obedience to the God who is gracious - focused most clearly on Mary's prayer:

Luke 1:38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

-were instruments of God's providential purposes in his world.

Our faith, our ordinary lives, our decisions too, are part of God's providential and gracious care. We today are part of the covenant family whose first father was Abraham, and which gave a welcome also to Ruth, the girl from Moab.. We share in an interconnectedness of family life from their time until now. The God who called Ruth is the God who calls us in Christ. May we - like Ruth, and like Mary the great descendant - pledge our willing and loving obedience in response to God's gracious invitation to enjoy our place under the refuge of his wings.

Ruth 2:12 "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

