

George Philip Bible Readings

Book of Ruth

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1:1-2

The Book of Ruth tends to be overlooked or to be read only as a nice love story. But we must keep in mind that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:14-17). The whole of Scripture is God-breathed and is given to us to instruct us and to make us wise in the matter of salvation, to teach and correct us, and so to train us that we will be ready and able for whatever service God calls us to. This should cause all of us, especially those called to minister God's Word, to consider the areas of Scripture that we tend to neglect to study and never preach. For our own good and the good of those we are called to serve, we need to cultivate seriously, as a practical principle of life, the attitude of Paul as expressed in Acts 20:17-21, 27, 32. We need the whole Word of God if we are to be mature, balanced believers and we must come to the Word looking for and expecting God to speak to us in a way that is applicable to the business of life and service. Of course, the application of the Word may not be to the immediate circumstances we find ourselves in, although it is wonderful just how often it proves to be so. The lessons we learn as we study day by day sometimes need to be stored up in our minds and hearts in preparation for situations yet to develop (Ps. 119:11; John 14:29). In the fulness of time, when the need arises, the Holy Spirit, who could be thought of as the Divine Librarian, brings out of the store the very word that is needed. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all the truth and it is with this attitude of expectation that we begin the story of Ruth.

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1:1-2

The story of Ruth is a love story about real people in real circumstances, having real struggles, disappointments and bereavements, and reacting to them in various ways, sometimes in faith, sometimes in bitterness. But right through the story the dominant note is of God, and God's working in human lives and circumstances. We learn of 'A God in absolute control of human affairs, however intimate, domestic or unimportant.' (T Swanston) We see how God can transform anything and everything, including family tragedy and personal disappointment, into everlasting good. It is the story of the God who works for good in everything on His people's behalf (Rom. 8:28); the God who, having begun the good work in, for and through His people, sees it through to perfect completion (Phil. 1:6). The story of Ruth cannot be understood simply in terms of the years spanned by their lives. If we look on to 4:13, 17 we see the whole story set in the context of the subsequent generations leading on to the birth of the Saviour. The love story of Ruth and Boaz played a significant part in the developing story of salvation, as is made plain in Matt. 1:1, 5-6, 16. There is an important lesson in this for us all. We are in danger of reducing our thinking about life to our own little corner: our hopes and fulfilment, our experiences and battles in our situation. The truth is that whether we are aware of it or not we, who are 'in Christ', are caught up into and play a part in the on-going purposes of God. We began this note by referring to God's activity in sovereign providence, but as the story goes on we see the reality of human decisions and, flowing from these decisions, circumstances that had to be lived with for many years. But God was in it all. Shakespeare was right, and truly biblical, when he wrote, 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.' (Hamlet) The story in Jeremiah 18:1-6 is wonderfully appropriate here. God is greater than all the sins and failures that would mar our lives. To be in the hand of the great Potter is comfort, encouragement and hope.

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1:1-2

We must consider the circumstances of the story and then ponder why Elimelech (whose name means, God is my king) made the decision to go to Moab. The story is set in the time of the Judges, a time of great fluctuations in the life of the people of God. They swung from radical backsliding and national disaster to spiritual to re-dedication and prosperity and never seemed to learn the lesson that only by walking in the obedience of faith would they prosper through God's blessing. Judges 21:25 is the perfect summary of the situation and atmosphere: spiritual dullness and moral confusion. We do not know who wrote the story of Ruth but the last few verses make plain it

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was written in the time of David. God inspired the writer by the Holy Spirit to put on record for all time this tale which makes plain that even in the darkest time of the Judges God did not leave Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17 RSV) and God caused the sure line of His purposes to develop and progress. We are told that Elimelech's decision was made as a result of the famine in Judah. Was the famine a judgment because of spiritual decline? That is a question we must ask when Christian life is dry. Why should it be so if God speaks of streams in the desert and floods on dry ground (Isa.35:6; 44:1-3)? We recognise that there is an enemy, and at times the Devil imposes on us a feeling of dryness that does *not* indicate spiritual fault. But here we have a man among the people of God reacting to circumstances by making a decision for himself and his family on totally materialistic grounds. The fertile land of Moab seemed the immediate and easy answer to the pressures of his situation. There is no indication that he sought or wanted God's guidance; no recognition that Moab had always been anti-Israel; and no assessment of how difficult it would be to maintain his family's witness as the people of God in the place they were choosing to stay. Decisions should be referred to God before they are made.

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The decision to move to Moab was followed by ten years that were full of sorrow. How soon Elimelech died we are not told. Nor are we told if he had any regrets about his decision to move his family. Obviously many stayed on in Judah and lived through the hardship of famine and therefore, in due time, there was a people Naomi could return to. Should we think of Elimelech as the kind of person (and there are many like this) who tend to take the easy way out of situations, who refuse hardship, and who leave church, job, or Christian service simply because they do not like it or because it is costly and long-term work? When we are called to endure hardship as good soldiers of Christ (2 Tim. 2:3) we need to remember that God can lift the pressure as He wills and He has promised that we will not be over-burdened (1 Cor. 10:13). Without fuller knowledge we cannot say whether Elimelech's decision was wilful disobedience or an error of judgment. He obviously reacted to the circumstances of famine, but reaction is not faith, and whatever is not faith is sin (Rom. 14:22-23; Jas. 4:13-17). We do not know if Naomi agreed with or protested against the decision to go to Moab. Perhaps her husband was the kind of man who never discussed things with his wife. That would be a sad state of affairs and could indicate just how far Elimelech was from being a spiritually minded man. Perhaps the sons also were indifferent to their mother's opinion or advice when they married Moabite wives. Relationships are still 'no go areas' with many young people when it comes to asking advice of parents, ministers or friends. When Elimelech died, Naomi's situation was still viable with two sons as wage-earners. But when the sons died it was different. It was then and only then, after ten years in Moab, that she set out for home (6): It makes us think of the circumstances and words of the Prodigal, 'I will arise and go to my father' (Luke 15:18).

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1:6-9

It had taken ten years in the far country to bring Naomi to this stage of decision and action. Then she heard that the faithful God of Israel was blessing His people and she set out to return to where she knew she belonged. It is easy to slip away from God; easy to settle down to a non-spiritual lifestyle; easy to wish things were different; and easy to lapse into loss of hope and to despair. But when Naomi heard the good news, the gospel news, of God's blessing given to His people, her heart was quickened by the Holy Spirit and she knew where she belonged. We shall see in the following verses that Naomi was a woman of faith, possibly led astray by the influence of her backslidden husband. What a desolating and dangerous influence we can have on people, especially those dear to us, when we drift away from God. We can see this, for example, in the life of Jacob, and we can see it in the disastrous consequences Lot brought on his family when he chose to stay in the area of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why do people choose (when they could choose otherwise) to live in places out of reach of spiritual ministry and the means of grace? But to return to the details of the story, we must note that the two girls had no children, and if they had had children they would not have had a place in Israel because their mothers were not Jews. It may have been one of the many sorrows of Naomi that her sons had married 'outside the covenant' and it may have been with great

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heartbreak that she told the girls to stay in Moab. From v.8 it is clear that mother and daughters-in-law had had a good relationship and Naomi committed the girls to the goodness and mercy of her God. It may well be that she had prayed lovingly for them over the years. This is indeed a story full of spiritual instruction.

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1:10-14

There is both a very human aspect and a profoundly spiritual aspect to this situation. There was a bond of affection and, no doubt, a real degree of respect for Naomi in the minds and hearts of the girls. Her character and her witness to her faith had influenced them and they wanted to go with her into the unknown future. But wisely (in a way that evangelists do not always follow) Naomi spelled out to them the cost of going with her on what was a pilgrim journey of faith. Humanly speaking, especially in the realm of these widows again finding husbands, the prospect was not encouraging. Naomi herself was not sure what kind of reception she would get returning after all these years. Perhaps she felt people would be critical in that she did not return as soon as the famine eased, or soon after her husband had died, or at least before her sons had married 'pagan outsiders'. It was wise and good of Naomi to insist that the girls should count the cost before committing themselves to a decision and a way of life they might regret later on. Naomi is also bravely honest in v.13 when she says plainly that her God had been grieved with her and that what they had all lived through was the result of her spiritual disobedience. No one can tell what feelings filled Naomi's heart when Orpah took her at her word and went away, nor what her feelings were, when Ruth insisted on staying. There is a choice to be made, right up to the last moment. We read in Matt. 19: 16-22 of a young man who turned away from following Jesus on the grounds of material considerations. We read in Lk. 23:39-43 the story of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. One trusted, so we learn that none need despair, but only one, so we learn that none might presume. Ruth heard the same message as Orpah, from the same gracious messenger, and faced the same situation of counting the cost. But she made a different decision.

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1:15-18

Whatever her own personal feelings were, Naomi was determined that Ruth should not follow her simply out of human affection, because that would not be sufficient to support and enable her in the demands of the future. But Ruth's answer seems to indicate that Naomi's influence had kindled faith, as well as human affection. The developing situation had brought Ruth to the point where she seems to have thought through what faith in Naomi's God meant and demanded in terms of commitment, and she was ready to go. Keep in mind that Ruth had been widowed, she had no children, and now the person nearest and dearest to her was leaving because of her convictions concerning God. Naomi's confession that she had been backsliding from her God (13) and was now returning may have been the final word of testimony that brought Ruth to her moment of decision. When we are praying for people we need to remind ourselves of the many and varied ways by which God's Spirit works, kindling both thoughts and desires without our knowing it, and leading those we pray for to the narrow but open gate that leads to life. The more Naomi spelled out the cost of discipleship, the more determined Ruth was. Her words in v.16-17 scarcely need comment. They are full of sweetness and strength and they indicate a commitment of life regardless of the cost and consequences, which were clearly recognised. Ruth was willing to break with the past, with all its religious and cultural involvement, and with family and friends. She was willing to face an unknown future, to be a stranger in a strange land. She had nothing to go on except what she had learned of Naomi's God and what she had seen in Naomi's life. Ruth made her choice and commitment. She would go with Naomi. It is a similar choice we must all make, whether or not we will go with Jesus, mindful of Jesus' words in Matt. 10:37-39; Lk. 14:25-33.

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1:15-18

We study these verses again because they show clearly that Naomi did not say anything to Ruth about the benefits and blessings that could be found through faith in Israel's God. It is true, of course, that the Gospel does hold out

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the promise of 'love and life and lasting joy' to be found in Jesus. Many, even backsliders like Naomi, can testify that there is peace, fulfilment, purpose and a great deal of happiness that can be ours in Christ. But in evangelism we need to remember that offering the benefits and blessings of Christ is not the same as offering Christ. The Gospel calls for repentance as well as faith, and looks for commitment and continuance as evidences of that repentance. A decision for Christ and a yielding of life to Christ is the beginning, not the end, and Ruth seems to have been clear about the fact that she was committing her whole future into the good hand of God, not knowing what that future would be, and as yet perhaps not knowing God all that well. She was to discover that God's plans for her were far more extensive and wonderful than anything she could have imagined (1 Cor. 2:9). Scripture makes it plain that God answers prayer far more abundantly than we ask, sometimes to our astonishment and even alarm (Eph. 3:20). God had plans for Ruth's future (Jer. 29:11) and He was already working out these plans in and through sore and perplexing circumstances. One lesson among many we can learn is that we must not assess and react to our situations on the basis of what we can see and understand at the time. God is always way ahead of us in His thinking, planning and working. Often, it is only as we look back that we see just how sure and effectual His working is. In considering what the Shorter Catechism says of 'effectual calling' and its benefits, we do well to read Rom. 8:28-39.

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1:19-22

Mother and daughter-in-law did not have a very happy or encouraging arrival in Bethlehem. If they had hoped to slip quietly into the community with time to adjust and find their feet, they were disappointed. It was all very public and the women (the men being at the barley harvest as v.22 indicates) were agog with gossip, making no attempt to hide their reaction and comments from Naomi. They remembered her from ten years ago and were astonished at the change in her. It seems the years in Moab had taken their toll. She disclaimed the name Naomi, which means 'pleasant', and asked to be called Mara, which means 'bitter', making plain that the sore changes in her life and circumstances were the result of God's dealings with her. Her words in v.20-21 could be read as bitterness against God, almost charging Him with hardness and unfairness. This, of course, could have been a natural, psychological reaction rather than a considered spiritual assessment. On the other hand it could be that Naomi was calling the women to see and to consider what happens to personality and life when a believer strays away from God and His good and perfect will. She knew full well that ten years of unfruitful life lay behind her and, of course, the whole process of coming back had not been easy. She was vulnerable, and for that reason alone we must not read too much into her words, nor criticise her too strongly. That is a lesson we must learn in all areas of pastoral counselling. We must try to understand why people sometimes blurt out words that make us wonder about their spiritual condition. Naomi had indeed known affliction and calamity. She did feel empty. But her own words testify that the Lord had brought her back to where she should be. Little did she realise then that, far from being empty, her return along with Ruth was the beginning of the most significant piece of service for God that she had ever known. The chapter ends with reference to the beginning of the barley harvest but there was far more than that beginning. As always God's timing was to prove perfect.

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2:1-7

When we preached on this chapter we began by saying: " Giving a sermon a title can be distracting and even dangerous. This chapter could well be entitled, 'How to meet and fall in love with the right person.' Of course, we must recognise that marriage is a gift of God's grace and not a right. It is given to some and withheld from others, according to God's good and perfect will. In the story of Ruth we see this working out with great simplicity. It just happened that Ruth came to that part of the harvest field belonging to Boaz (3), and her concern was the practical one of gleaning what was left by the reapers. It is very doubtful if romance was in her mind at all. And, it just happened, that Boaz decided at that time to visit his workmen (4). But the story makes plain that the whole romance came about by God's design rather than by human planning, although in the next chapter it does seem that Naomi did a bit of arranging. The sermon referred to went on to consider the question, 'How to meet' and

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suggested that some would be disappointed with the answer: 'Leave it to God.' But God's thoughts and plans for us are altogether good and our concern should be to be the right kind of person, learning from the disciplines of life, and living our lives to please God. After all, what Christian would want to marry a half-hearted, shallow, immature, self-centred partner? We need to consider whether we would be a help or a hindrance to the other person, be it friend or marriage partner. Remember that Ruth was a young, childless widow, but she had learned real faith, and it seems that faith had worked in her a grace and humility of character which Boaz seemed to recognise the very first time their paths crossed. But the context of that first meeting was God's pattern for providing for the poor (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-22). We have a God who thinks of everything!

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2:1-7

We consider these verses in greater detail. Boaz was a man of wealth. He had stayed in the land in spite of the rigours of the famine and had prospered, whereas Elimelech had run away from the difficulties and had ended up with nothing. Some translations make Boaz a man of standing or a man of valour and this may indicate his moral character. We must remember that Boaz was the son of Rahab who had been a harlot (Matt. 1:5; Josh. 2:1), and he may well have been aware of what the grace of God had done in his mother's life. Whatever his reactions may have been as a teenager, he had grown up to be a man of grace and dignity, a man with a real faith and an outgoing disposition. See him with his workers and note their reaction to him (4). No doubt there had been those who never allowed Rahab to forget her past and those who would have continued the slurs and slights to her son. This could have made Boaz a bitter personality, or a man withdrawn into himself, or a man brash and unfeeling towards others. But there is no indication of that and we can only conclude that the grace of God at work in his life had persuaded him of his value and integrity and had enabled him to hold up his head without any sense of shame. Why he was not yet married we cannot tell. There may have been a shy reluctance in relationships, but the truth seems to be that he was being kept for the girl God had planned for him. Boaz noticed a stranger among the gleaners and it was gracious of him to enquire about her to the overseer rather than accost the girl herself, who might well have been frightened. In v.2 Ruth was aware that it was only with permission that she could glean the corners of the field and in v.7 the overseer confirmed that she had asked permission. The fact that she had worked without any rest indicated something of the urgency of her poverty. The scene is taking shape. God is in it.

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2:8-13

On the face of it, it was an accident or a coincidence that Boaz and Ruth met, and it was as both of them went about their ordinary duties, neither of them aware that this was a day of destiny. Ruth's concern was to work hard to provide for Naomi and herself, and Boaz was concerned to see that his farm harvest was being dealt with efficiently. It may have been that the heart of Boaz leapt rather strangely when he first saw the unknown girl (v.5). Then, having heard the comments of his supervisor, he took the action recorded in v.8-9. He was interested but also discreet and in no way put pressure on the girl. He guaranteed her safety, and in this we see that Boaz was well aware of the atmosphere of society in respect of the moral danger facing unaccompanied girls at work. Sexual harassment is not a new thing and the young men who worked for Boaz were told that wrong behaviour would cost them their jobs. Ruth's reaction was one of surprise (10) and gratitude (13). Perhaps she had been full of fear, wondering if she, as a stranger, might be forbidden to glean in these fields. But her fear was unnecessary, because the God she trusted was working out His plans for her, even though she was not aware of it at the time. How often Satan uses fear to confuse, distract and hinder us. We need to remind ourselves more than we do that our times are in God's hand (Ps. 31:15) and that even though Satan may have desired to have us, to do us harm, the great Intercessor is guarding us by His prevailing prayers (Lk. 22:31-32). We must also note that true love is neither blind nor dazzled by mere attractiveness. Boaz had heard of this girl's faith, character, life and service before he ever met her. Perhaps he had been thinking that a girl of that quality and spiritual calibre would make a good wife. Now he had met her. He was interested. But it is clear from v.12 that his interest was rooted in good spiritual soil.

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2:14-17

How wise the Bible is when it deals with the development of relationships. Boaz had heard about the quality and character of Ruth; he had met her, been attracted and had recognised her manifest spiritual quality. Now in a wise way that could not possibly cast any shadow on her or on himself, he invited her to join the assembled company of workers for a meal together. Boaz was able to see this girl in mixed company and that is a far better context for assessing one's feelings than in the kind of relationship in which two people pair off, keep themselves to themselves, and are for ever in each other's company. The young who read these notes, and all those who have to counsel the young, should see the importance of allowing a relationship time to discover its true nature and then time to allow it to develop in company rather than in isolation. We are not told if the two people here were tremendously aware of each other's proximity but we can imagine the young men smiling knowingly at each other when the 'boss' gave the instructions in v.15-16. Boaz passing the food to Ruth at the meal was a sign of favour as well as acceptance; the direct instructions to the workers and not just to the overseer made plain his personal wish to protect Ruth; and the orders that Ruth was to be allowed to glean even among the sheaves and to do so while the men were reaping and not just after they had finished (as the Law required), all served to guarantee the girl's safety. The men would see to it that the grain pulled from the gathered sheaves would be generous. Ruth must surely have wondered just what was going on. Perhaps her thoughts were mostly concerning how good God was in providing for her. On the other hand, perhaps she was thinking about this very nice man who had been so kind.

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2:18-23

Note that from 1:22 and 2:23 we are dealing with a spell of time from the beginning of the barley harvest right through to the end of the wheat harvest. This may be two months or longer. After the first meeting with Boaz, Ruth went home with more barley than could have been expected and also with the food left over from the meal during the day. It was not surprising that Naomi asked questions, and she immediately seemed to recognise that God's providence was at work in the situation. What had started out as an ordinary working day was beginning to appear as a significant moment in Ruth's life and service. The lesson is clear: the ordinary is never ordinary and, however life works out, we are in fact in God's good hand. We can trust Him for every aspect of life and the way to trust Him is to set ourselves to please God in the ongoing business of the situation in which God's providence has set us. Any given day may begin in a very ordinary, unpromising way as it did for Ruth (v.3) and by the end of the day a whole new world of possibility may have opened up. Ruth, being a Moabite, may not have grasped the significance of Boaz being a close kinsman. That only becomes clear as the story goes on. Ruth's words in v.21 indicate only the matter of 'a summer job' in the harvest fields of Boaz. But God was working out His purposes and this whole story, as we have seen, is but part of the great saga of redemption developing through long generations until the birth of Jesus the Saviour. If our lives are set in the context of the outworking of God's good and perfect will, then the great call to us is to walk closely with God, walking in the light with Him (1 John 1:5-7), trusting Him, believing that His plans for us are good and nothing but good. If we do this, then we will make it our business to get rid of all the weights and hindrances that might hold us back, and so live our lives looking away to Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2).

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3:1-5

We must understand that in the Jewish culture of the time it was the responsibility of parents to arrange the marriages of their children, and Naomi was acting on this basis. It was also provided in Jewish law that if a woman was left a widow without children she had a claim on the nearest male relative in the tribe to marry her so that children would be born to preserve the family name and property within the nation of Israel. This matter of Levirate marriage is provided for in Deut. 25:5-10. Family was very important in Israel, and it was expected that an honourable kinsman would willingly accept this responsibility and there should be no difficulty in the widow or

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some other relative bringing the matter to the notice of the near kinsman. Of course, people who know God's law do not always respect it and may indeed make use of it for their own ends. This is what the Sadducees did in their unbelief in the questioning of Jesus in Lk. 20:27-33. It seems in our story that Naomi was being unnecessarily manipulative in her arranging of the situation. We may admire her earnest care to see her daughter-in-law provided for but we must wonder about her methods. If, as we suggested yesterday, she was quick to see the hand of God in the situation, why did she not trust God to bring it to pass (Ps. 37:4-5 AV; Prov. 3:5-6)? Was she simply one of the managing or interfering type of person who thinks she is good at arranging other people's affairs? There is a word here for parents and friends to warn against either pushing or holding back young people in the affairs of the heart. Yes, there is need for discussion, guidance, wise advice and, sometimes, words of caution and even warning, but we must never take into our own hands what is best left in God's hands. And, at times, it is so clear that God has everything in His hand.

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3:6-13

Look back to the previous verses to see the emphasis Naomi put on outward appearance and remember that Boaz had already been impressed by Ruth in her working clothes. Some people suggest that Ruth, being poor, would not be likely to have 'best' clothes. The secrecy advocated in v.3 seems to be a policy of deception and ill accords with faith. The instruction in v.4 is unclear to us, especially in the matter of uncovering Boaz, but it certainly seems that Ruth was being told to do something which was at least immodest and which could be interpreted by anyone seeing it as being immoral. Perhaps Naomi was trying to put Boaz into a situation from which he could not decently escape. If this is so, then Naomi was forgetting the God who had brought her back from the far country and who had given her tokens of His love and goodness. Now, we have become so accustomed to improper behaviour and to seeing it on television by way of art or entertainment, that we may be tempted to pass over this incident with a chuckle. But it is no laughing matter and we need to emphasise that in the realm of relationships anything and everything that is a breach of modesty is a denial of love, affection and respect. When, in the realm of sexuality, there is this impropriety, then people are making use of each other for the purpose of gratification. When this happens a relationship has so deteriorated to the level of the physical that there is little chance of the two people ever getting to know each other in their true personalities. We are glad that it is recorded that when wakened Boaz was startled, afraid (AV), possibly because he was aware of what the situation could have led to, and of how both their reputations might have been stained.

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3:6-13

Perhaps Boaz was first alarmed because he had no idea who this woman was at his feet. It is clear from v.12 that he had already made enquiry about Ruth and, from the detail that he was not in fact the closest relative, it seems that already he had been thinking of Ruth in terms of marriage. He may have been more alarmed, or even disappointed, when he discovered that it was in fact Ruth. He would not have wanted her to humiliate herself in this way, not least because his own intentions were totally honourable. Ruth's words are simply a statement to the effect that she was asking Boaz to take on himself the function of 'kinsman' to fulfil the law of Moses. The spreading of the corner of the man's robe over the widow was an accepted symbol of claiming her as wife. There is no improper suggestion in this at all. One commentator indicates a similarity between the Hebrew word translated 'skirt' with the similar word in 2:12 translated 'wings'. That introduces an element of tender care into the action. Boaz' words in v.10-11 are very touching. He was aware that Ruth would have been a prize for any of the younger men, but she had not shown any inclination to go that way. In following the pattern of approaching the nearest relative (as she thought) she had chosen to go God's way. It was when Boaz saw the spiritual worth of this girl, and that the community was aware of her quality, all doubt fled from his mind and he made plain that unless the law of God prevented it, he wanted to marry her. The story reminds us of Gen. 2:20-22, and how God brought the woman to the man in such a way that there was no doubt, no need for agonising prayers for guidance, and no possibility of that particular kind of hurt that comes when a relationship begins and then ends.

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3:6-13

Read along with these verses Prov. 31: 10-12ff which speaks of how a good wife is a great find and 1 Tim. 2:8-10; 1 Pet. 3:1-4, which speak of the attractiveness and qualities that have to do with spiritual and moral character rather than with dress. Boaz assured Ruth that there would be no question of her being a Moabite being held against her, because over the spell she had lived in Bethlehem she had had a true testimony. Boaz' comment in v.10 is not simply a reference to the fact that he may have been quite a bit older than Ruth. He was referring to the fact that from the beginning she had shown faithfulness to Naomi, being prepared to work hard to provide for her, and now, although being from Moab and not strictly under the law of Moses, she gladly submitted herself to it. This makes clear that far back in the story (1:16-17), Ruth's spiritual confession and commitment were real. She was going with the God of whom she had learned from Naomi, not just going with a mother-in-law she loved and respected. There is gentlemanly tenderness in the term 'daughter', just as there was tenderness and value in the word when Jesus used it in Matt. 9:22. Perhaps Ruth was alarmed to hear there was a man who had a better claim than Boaz, and if it was also true that 'all the city knows thee for a bride worth the winning,' (Knox) then her future was very uncertain. The advice to stay where she was and not to try to go home in the dark was wise, not just because the streets were dangerous then, as they are now, but because a woman wandering the streets at night risked her reputation in a very specific way (Song of Solomon 5:7). Of course, Ruth being there at all had created the possibility of misunderstanding. This again is something that young, unmarried people should keep in mind in our society when there is so much freedom in going to each other's flats. A group of people all leaving a house in the early hours of the morning is one thing, but an individual so leaving can give ground for people to jump to conclusions and to think the worst. We all have our Christian testimony to think about.

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3:14-18

Keep in mind that the repeated reference to 'next of kin' (9,13), has to do with the near kinsman acting to redeem and to remedy the situation and to meet the need of the one who could not act for herself. The redeemer has to act willingly and to pay a price, and we cannot but think of the great Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the church (of which we are a part) as His beloved bride, whom He redeemed by the shedding of His precious blood (Eph. 5:25-27). It was testified by Pilate and by the dying thief that there was no sin or wrong in Jesus (Lk. 23:4,14,41; cf. Heb. 4:14-16) and here in our story, first thing in the morning, Boaz made sure He was awake first and sent Ruth back home before people were about. He also gave orders to his servants that no mention should be made of Ruth having spent the night there. In fact there had been no wrong-doing but there must be no appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22 AV). Boaz gave a generous gift to Ruth and laid it, or helped to lay it, on her head to carry it. The reference to not being empty(17) must have awakened in Naomi the emptiness of her condition when she first returned to Bethlehem (1:21). The blessings of Boaz as kinsman redeemer were not to be confined to Ruth. Others would be blessed, and that testimony would go on to draw others to the God who blesses His people so richly. It is wonderful how the Old Testament's true and human stories turn the mind and heart to the Saviour. It is equally wonderful to be reminded that the great Redeemer is also our kinsman. He knows what it is like to be human because He was tempted. He knew tiredness and tears, and He knew perplexity. (Heb. 2:17-18; John 4:1-6; 11:35; Lk. 19:41; Matt. 26:36-39; Mk. 15:34).

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3:14-18

We have criticised Naomi for manipulating the situation and there is a possibility that her words in v.16 indicated that she had had a troubled night. When we read her words in v.18 they seem so full of faith and trust that we wonder why she did not have this attitude earlier. But who are we to criticise someone for having fluctuations of faith? She gave Ruth sound spiritual advice when she counselled her to wait on the Lord. That is the best thing to do with our uncertainties, and it is far more beneficial than worrying, especially when the situation is such that

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there is nothing we can do. They that wait on the Lord do in fact renew their strength (Isa. 40:29-31). They who learn to be still do begin to know God in His grace and goodness (Ps. 46:10) and in that way they learn to rest in the Lord and to wait patiently for Him (Ps. 37:7 AV). This is not a case of trying to create peace in ourselves by wishful thinking or by the power of positive thinking. It is a practical attitude of life grounded in facts that we grasp by faith. Naomi assured Ruth that there was a man who would not rest until he had done what was necessary to settle the whole business of her redemption. The next chapter will tell the story, but today we allow our thoughts to be led to Jesus. It is recorded of Him that a time came when He set His face to go to Jerusalem and nothing thereafter could deter Him (Lk. 9: 51). The time came when He spoke of a 'restlessness' within Him that would not ease until His work was done (Lk. 12:50). We spoke yesterday of the disturbance of His heart in Gethsemane, but that gave way to the triumphant cry, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30) That cry tells us of a redemption secured for us by our Kinsman-Redeemer, and we have the assurance that the God who began the good work of salvation will bring it to completeness (Phil. 1:6). Little wonder Wesley sang of a thousand tongues to sing our great Redeemer's praise.

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4:1-6

Keep in mind what has been said in our studies regarding the historical situation. It was the time of the Judges when the spiritual life of the nation fluctuated from times of great apostasy to times of spiritual revival. We have seen, with the observance of the laws regarding the right of the poor to glean the fields, that the law of God was still in measure the basis of social order. We have seen also that in the moral sphere the young men were sufficiently rebellious that Boaz warned them to behave rightly towards Ruth or lose their jobs. Whatever the atmosphere, we see in Boaz a man of spiritual and moral stature who had not been drawn away from his loyalty to God in spite of his material success. The picture in these verses is of Boaz going about the matter of getting Ruth to be his wife all in accord with the law and will of God. That is the surest basis for establishing relationships. The meeting at the gate, the gathering of the elders, the wise men whose judgments in the law of God were valued, and the formal request by Boaz to the next of kin were all correct in procedure. The narrative of the situation is stated and Boaz testified that he was not in any sense seeking to intrude on the legal right of the other man (3-4). We have in an earlier note referred to the Levirate law regarding the rights of widows and the matter of the selling of property, and these are the issues being discussed here (Deut. 25:5-10; Lev. 25:25-30). We cannot but be impressed by the attitude of Boaz in v.4 where he seems to put in real danger all possibility of actually getting Ruth for his wife. The other relative responded at once to the effect that he would buy Naomi's field and so keep it within the family or tribe. Seemingly it was good land and therefore a good investment for the future. Then Boaz stated the further aspect of the situation, namely that in buying the field the man would acquire Ruth as a wife. That, as we shall see tomorrow, decided the matter.

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4:1-6

The position under the Jewish law seems to have been that the kinsman was under obligation to marry the childless widow in order to raise up children. But these children would belong to the family name of Elimelech and Naomi, and in due time they would inherit in full the field the man was so willing to buy. When he realised that he would really not benefit personally in the material and financial sense, he withdrew his offer. He may not have been a rich man and, although he could afford to pay the price for the field, it would then go to Ruth's children and he would end up poorer. If this be so, and his words 'I cannot redeem it,' seem to suggest it, then we should not criticise the man. He was willing to do right by God's law but he had not the capacity for the transaction. On the other hand it may be that he was the kind of man who was willing to do God's will if it brought him advantage but if it brought responsibility and possibly personal loss, then he was not willing. If this second interpretation is correct, then we see in this man, whose name is never mentioned, an attitude somewhat similar to that of Esau, who sold out his spiritual place and inheritance for the sake of immediate gratification (Gen. 25:29-34; Heb. 12: 16-17). We must allow God's Word to search our hearts. It is all too easy to come to Christ, and to be grateful indeed for all the

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fulness of life He brings (John 10:10) and to rejoice in love, life and lasting joy that can be found in Him, but then, when the claims of true discipleship are presented and when the cost of spiritual service begins to demand self-denial, indeed death to self and a forsaking of the world and its popularity, many draw back. It happened in Jesus' life and ministry, as John 6:66-71 makes plain. Saving faith and obedient discipleship belong together and cannot be separated.

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4:7-12

The manner in which the legal transaction was confirmed and sealed was a dramatic one, carried out in the public square, not in the secrecy of a lawyer's office. Everyone knew what this man was doing in relation to the law of God and in terms of his own obedience. Of course, all that we do is totally open to the eyes of God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). God knows the truth even though other people may regard us as wonderfully dedicated Christians. It is also true that people can be aware of our profession of faith and also aware of the fact that we do little in terms of practical or costly service, especially in the life and work of the congregation to which we belong and to whose life and ministry we owe our spiritual health and blessing. Think of the hymns we tend to sing so easily and even enthusiastically:

'Take my life, and let it be,
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.'

(Havergal)

'Go, labour on, spend and be spent,
Thy joy to do the Father's will.'

(Bonar)

'Christian, work for Jesus,
Who on earth for thee
Laboured, wearied, suffered,
Died upon the Tree.'

(Hasloch)

This is not a plea for endless activity, because activity is not necessarily service. It is all too easy to run ourselves into exhaustion and then be of little use to people or to God. The whole issue is one of being willing to do God's will, and not drawing back when it becomes costly. No-one who is truly in Christ will ever lose their salvation. Both now and forever there is no condemnation and no separation (Rom. 8:1, 38-39). But we can lose our reward if our Christian lives have been made of the straw of half heartedness and disobedience (1 Cor. 3:10-15). We can also lose our service, and be laid aside as of no further use (1 Cor. 9:24-27). These are solemn thoughts.

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4:7-12

We wonder if this nameless man was aware of the spiritual consequences of the decision he was making that day. We wonder too what his reaction was when he heard the people and the elders speaking such words of blessing to Boaz. The blessing could have been his and his name could have been in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus in Matt. 1:5-6. As it is he remains unknown to this day. The story of God's working went on and the man was forgotten. Think of some people we have known, loved, prayed with and worked with who, for reasons perhaps unknown to us, contracted out of the work of the Gospel and have just been forgotten. Some may have thought the work would collapse with their departure but there are always those who carry the work forward. In the sealing of the 'bargain' (a poor word for such a love transaction), Boaz saw to it that everything was done decently and in order (1 Cor.

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14:40). Things that are right deserve to be done in a worthy and dignified way. The whole story shows that Boaz did not allow his love for Ruth to deny his spiritual commitment to God, nor did he allow his assurance as to the outcome to make him impetuous. The 'feeling' of the story suggests that before the legal meeting at the gate of the city Boaz was persuaded in his heart that God was giving him Ruth to be his wife. When God gives you assurance of that, you can be equally sure that He will not let another have the one promised to you. When will people, especially young people, trust God with their human love and hopes? He is the best match-maker and He sets such high value on tender human feelings that He will not lead any of us into unnecessary hurt. If, in our relationships of various kinds, we were careful not to cause hurt but to treat others with true value, our individual personalities and our relationships would have the marks of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ on them.

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4:7-12

We have said a great deal in these readings about love and relationships and, before considering v.11-12, I commend the following words by G Campbell Morgan (formerly of Westminster Chapel) commenting on Song of Solomon 8:4 (AV) – I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not up, nor awaken love until it please. 'What is this warning? That love is so sacred a thing that it must not be trifled with. It is not to be sought. It stirs and awakens of itself. To trifle with the capacity for it, is to destroy that very capacity. This is the evil of all philandering. Would that these words could be sung into the deepest soul of all youths and maidens. The tragedies of disobedience to the warnings are everywhere. Is there any application of these words possible in that higher realm we have had in mind.... They warn us against the peril of endeavouring to force an experience of love to Christ and God in others. Our privilege is to introduce our loved ones, our children, our friends, everybody to Christ; but they must fall in love with Him for themselves. Was not this in His mind when He told His disciples to tell no man that He was the Christ? As He had said to Peter, that revelation comes, not of flesh and blood, but of the Father. We wrong the souls of the young, and indeed of any, when we endeavour to force an experience. Let us lead them to Him. He will awaken love.' Ponder these words well, not least to constrain us all to realise that the greatest thing we can do for others is to pray for them.

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4:7-12

The fact that all the people are mentioned by name before the elders signifies that their presence was more than a formality. What we are reading about is the people of God acting as a people, a congregation, a fellowship. It is something similar to our asking a congregation to stand and to share in the vows taken at a baptism. True spirituality is personal but never individualistic. The blessing expressed in terms of Rachel and Leah seems to refer to the fruitfulness of their marriages, particularly in respect of the building up of the people of God into a nation. The people then prayed that Boaz would prosper in God's blessing and become renowned. Little did they know just how important a link he was to prove to be in God's ongoing purposes. The reference to Tamar points back to the story in Genesis 38, a strange and disturbing story, which does not show Judah in a good light. Tamar was widowed and subsequently wronged grievously by more than one man, and finally by Judah himself. Perez seems to have been the significant son of Judah and possibly the Bethlehemites (among whom this whole story is set) were his descendants. The words of their blessing arose from their own experience of God's goodness and they wished for Boaz and Ruth the same rich blessing. They also spoke of children to be born, not simply in natural terms but in terms of God's gift. It is indeed God who gives life, and that is something that needs to be remembered in a day when talk about abortion seems so casual. If we think again of the story of Tamar with its wrongs and shames, we see the truth of Romans 5:20; where sin abounded, grace abounded much more. How we need to ponder the gracious over-ruling of God's good providence, and how we need to hide God's Word in our hearts so that we will be kept from sinning. The whole of the blessing spoken by the people looked to the future with expectation. Although it is not recorded, the meeting of the elders may well have ended with the words of the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:22-27).

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4:13-22

There are grounds for believing that Boaz, being either a bachelor or a widower, had at this stage no children. The marriage and the birth of their first-born son were a wonderful seal of blessing on two people who, in New Testament terms, had sought first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). There is no doubt that their personal desires were yielded gladly into second place without there being any reducing of the romantic thrill and satisfaction. One of the first reactions was that of the women who spoke of the blessing and fulfilment of the grandmother. If we read carefully v.14-15 we see just how totally God had restored Naomi's life and hope. The story began with her bereavements and bitterness (1:20-21) but now she was full to overflowing. Remember that she had been adrift from God for ten years, possibly as the result of her husband's influence, but now she knew that she had a God who loves and restores the backslider (Hosea 14:4 AV). In fact she was beginning to prove that God does not just forgive and take us back, but He restores the wasted years (Joel 2:24-26). Such is God's goodness and mercy that those who watch and the person concerned can scarcely believe there ever had been barren years of disobedience. Think of how the prodigal son was fully restored to place, privilege and service. Of course, there are often elder brothers who grudge forgiveness and who never allow the sins and failures to be forgotten. But we have a wonderful God whose loving desire is that we should have the best of His blessings in fullest measure. Why He should love us like that is beyond our understanding. It is certainly beyond our deserving. When Ruth first made her vow of commitment in 1:16-17, had she any idea what it would lead to? God's thoughts are always greater than ours.

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4:13-22

As we come to an end of this wonderfully human story that is so full of spiritual significance, we are pointed right down through the generations to David and, as we have mentioned several times, to great David's greater Son, the Saviour of the world. The story began with Ruth as a Moabite, an outsider as far as God's covenant people were concerned. The story ends with her having a place, a blessing, a human fulfilment and a spiritual service at the heart of the people and work of God. She was brought in by the grace of God, just as we have been. The contrast in our position is portrayed wonderfully in Ephesians. The sinner's condition is first described as being spiritually dead and then made alive by the work of God's grace (Eph. 2:1-5). It was the grace of God, working through the godly influence of Naomi, that awakened Ruth's heart to God. In Ephesians the sinner's position, separated from God, and an outsider as far as His blessings are concerned, is stated in a sequence of negatives: Christless, Stateless, Friendless, Hopeless and Godless (Eph. 2:11-12). Note the simple words, 'But God' and 'But now' (Eph. 2:4, 13), because they signify the intervention of God's sovereign grace, by which the sinner is brought near. The sinner, saved by grace, is then portrayed as being a member of the household of God, someone who belongs, who feels safe in belonging, and who has all the privileges of belonging (Eph. 2:13,19-22). Paul's words make plain that the people of God belong not only to God but to each other, and are built into the spiritual structure of God's work down through the ages. Ruth and Boaz in their generation, and we in ours, the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the great and small of church history, and all those who come after us belong together in one glorious fellowship and service. Our personal stories fit into and play their part in God's story. That is what it means to be a Christian.

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The long-term view

We have on several occasions in our study of the Book of Ruth referred to the fact that Boaz and Ruth are mentioned specifically in the genealogy of Matthew 1:1-17, a list of names that spans the centuries and culminates in the words, 'Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.' It took place in Bethlehem, the setting of the story of Ruth. We must note that the names of Boaz and Ruth are neither at the beginning nor at the end of the list and we must see the two individuals and their marriage as a significant link in a long chain of purposeful events. The Book of Ruth does not tell the whole story, only the events leading up to the marriage, but we have grounds for believing that the marriage, begun so significantly in glad submission to the will of God, led to a life of faithful obedience. It is not always so. Our first parents in the ideal circumstances of the Garden of Eden, given to each

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other by God for their mutual blessing and joint service, and upheld by the promises of God, strayed from the will of God and introduced confusion into world history (Gee. 3:1 ff). We are told in the New Testament of others who began well and fell by the wayside (Gal. 1:6- 7; 3:1). Demas went back on his commitment to Christ (2 Tim. 4:10); Mark early on had contracted out from a term of missionary service with no reason recorded (Acts 15:37- 38); and there were those in Rev. 2:4 who had left the love they had at first. It is not surprising that we are exhorted in Heb. 6:10-12 to imitate those who by faith and patient continuance inherited God's promises. As time went on, Boaz and Ruth may have gradually come to be aware that their lives had a positive significance in the long story of God's gracious purposes. On the other hand they may have felt that after the publicity of the events leading to their marriage their life was very ordinary with little to show. It is a temptation we all meet and we must learn to judge nothing before the time, and to concentrate on being faithful in the circumstances God has set us in. He always knows what He is doing.

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Epilogue

Taking the long-term view of the life of Boaz and Ruth and their children after them, we must remind ourselves that for us also the principle is true that others have laboured and we have entered into their labours (John 4:38). Because this is so, as Jesus made plain, there are times when we see great results from our particular labours, which results could never have been but for the hard labour of others before us. It is given to some to labour for a life-time clearing the ground of accumulated, well-established moral and spiritual rubble, ploughing the ground, and watering it by costly prayer so that others will come to sow the seed and reap the harvest. Boaz and Ruth were used to prepare for the succeeding generations and this is true of us also. In due time we shall hand on the work to others. It is our responsibility and privilege so to labour that we will hand it on in good condition to those whom God has been preparing to serve. Remember the dereliction that Ezra and Nehemiah inherited on their return to Jerusalem after the seventy years of the captivity. The ruins were a testimony to a previous generation's spiritual unfaithfulness and failure. The story of Boaz and Ruth started in great simplicity in an unimportant town that was to have a great future (Micah 5:2). Ruth grew up in Moab, possibly with little or no religious training or spiritual privilege and her marriage to an Israelite was contrary to the law of God. And yet God's hand was on her and she became a veritable saint, set apart for God. Boaz, in spite of his background of privilege and wealth, was uncorrupted. His heart was fixed on God (Ps. 57:7 AV). Ruth and Boaz had many difficulties, not least the sorrow and great poverty of Ruth's background. But, 'circumstances can neither make nor mar saints. If we cannot begin our saintship in the land of Moab, we shall never be saints in the land of Judah. If a man cannot be a saint as a wealthy man, though he lose all his wealth, poverty will not make a saint of him. If a man cannot be a saint as a poor man, wealth, if it comes to him, will in all probability damn him.' (G Campbell Morgan). Think of Paul who learned to be content in whatever circumstances he found himself in (Phil. 4:4-7, 10-13). Did he learn that in measure from Psalms 23 and 121? He certainly had confidence in the God who ordered his life when he wrote Romans 8:28-39. Are we learning?

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