

Ruth

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- [0 : 0 0] Now we've been looking in this past week and also again for this in the next couple of weeks about, we could say, story of a small town.
- We're looking at incidents about the Lord has made use of Bethlehem down the years and down the ages in order to prepare ultimately for the most important thing that Bethlehem ever hosts.
- And that is of course the birth of our Lord. But of course the story of Bethlehem begins long before that. We looked last Wednesday about the first occasion when it appears in the scripture narrative and that is with the death of Rachel and the birth of Benjamin at Genesis 35 there.
- And now we come then to the book of Ruth which we're told was set in the days of the judges. Verse 1 of chapter 1. It came to pass when the judges ruled that there was a famine in the land.
- And because there's a famine in the land that's what sets the scene for Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons Malam and Caelan to cross the Jordan or to go into the land of Moab.
- [1 : 0 9] If there is a famine it is almost certainly because there is lack of rainfall. Because lack of rainfall would mean lack of pasture which would mean there's no grass for the beasts in the field to graze upon.
- It would also mean the crops don't grow because they haven't got water and so on. So that would make a famine all round both for the livestock and for the people. Now whether there was more rainfall in Moab or whether it's just because they had better deep supplies, wells of water which could then irrigate their fields or whatever.
- Moab is not that far away as the crow flies. But that could make all the difference in terms of whether or not there was food there. So we read of course at the end of this chapter, So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moab, I test her daughter-in-law with her, which returned there to the country of Moab and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.
- Now we said last week that Bethlehem means house of bread. It means also that that would be an extremely fruitful part of the holy land under normal circumstances.
- It would be very good pasture land. It would be very fruitful in terms of the crops. We've got mention here of the barley harvest and then we've got how Ruth stayed gleaning behind Boaz's harvest workers right through to the end of barley harvest.
- [2 : 3 6] It says at the end of chapter 2 there. And into the wheat harvest and wilt with her mother-in-law. So you've got two different crops both being harvested. One presumably not long after the other.
- One of them perhaps ripens a little sooner than the other. But clearly there's an abundance of crops now. There's an abundance of food, of pasturage again after this time of famine.
- The book of Ruth is set approximately a thousand years after the incident we looked at last time with the death of Rachel.

A thousand years. Now we tend to think in terms of, well, old biblical times as if they're all sort of higgledy-piggledy in each other's pockets and one's very close to another.

Just as in many ways we read the sort of names and locations in the Bible and we think they're all pretty much close to each other. But then when you look at a map or you look at the actual places where they are, they can often be quite far apart and they represent quite a journey.

[3 : 36] So likewise, although this is only the second time that Bethlehem appears in the scripture narrative, a thousand years of biblical history have passed between the death of Rachel and the birth of Benjamin and now the time of Ruth.

Now we find that a bit difficult to grasp, to comprehend it, well, come on, can't possibly be that long, you know, they've gone down into Egypt, they've come back out again and here we are at the group of Ruth.

Well, you've got to bear in mind that if we read in Exodus 12, remember that at the time, so just by way of background, at the time when Benjamin was born, in other words when Rachel died, Joseph would already be in Egypt almost certainly at that point.

Because Joseph had been there 22 years by the time his family came down and settled in Egypt. So he's almost certainly already in Egypt by the time Benjamin is born, by the time Rachel dies.

And then we read in Exodus 12, when these lights are coming up out of Egypt, at verse 40, the sojourning of the children of Israel, which dwelt in Egypt, was 430 years.

[4 : 50] And it came to pass at the end of 430 years, even the same day it came to pass that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. So the time that they've been down there, they weren't oppressed as slaves all of that time, but from the time when Jacob and his family come down into Egypt, to when they finally come out in the Exodus, 430 years.

Now, Joshua, who takes over, remember, from Moses, we first encounter him as Moses' servant in Exodus 33. And then we read of how when the first tabernacle, not the tabernacle with the Ark of the Covenant, but the first prayer tent was set up.

The Lord speak unto Moses, verse 11 in Exodus 33, As a man speaketh unto his friend, and he turned again into the camp. But his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle.

A young man. Now, of course, that's a generic term, but does young mean? It probably means in his thirties. If it was just in his twenties, he'd probably be described as a youth. But might be twenties, but it probably means, you know, roughly about thirty-ish, but might be in his twenties.

Now, remember that after Moses dies, you'd end up at forty years wandering in the wilderness with Joshua as Moses' servant. Then Moses dies. So whatever age Joshua is, add on forty years.

[6 : 17] So either in the sixties or the seventies. And we read at the end of the book of Joshua, in chapter 24, that he's a hundred and ten when he dies. Which means that he's probably got a good forty years leading the children of Israel as the sole leader.

Good forty years plus. So, four hundred and thirty years in Egypt. And then another forty years wandering in the wilderness. And then another forty years with Joshua as the leader of them.

And then we're told in Acts 13, verse 20. After that he gave unto them judges about the space of four hundred and fifty years.

Until Samuel the prophet. Now, even if you allow for the fact that the judges, time of the judges, might include Samuel as well. Might be stretched to include Joshua as well.

You could argue that, no, it's quite separate. At any rate, it's in the time of the judges. It's, you know, by the time you add all the arithmetic together. And bear in mind that at the end of the book of Ruth, you've got her giving birth to Obed.

[7 : 23] Who is then the father of Jesse. Who is the father of King David. Now, remember that Jesse, it is said, he went for an old man in the days of Saul.

So, he is an old man by the time David is born. And if we say that, we scroll back to the birth of Jesse and then add on, say, another thirty to forty years for the birth of his father Obed before that.

You're probably looking at, again, about a century or so before David comes on the scene that Ruth gives birth to Obed. So, it's coming towards the end of the time of the judges.

So, by this time, it's approximately, as we say, about, give or take, a thousand years. Now, if you think in terms of just how much that is, a thousand years ago, I was going to say, who was the king of Scotland a thousand years ago?

I had to look it up. It was actually Malcolm II. If you've ever heard of Malcolm II, that's how long ago it was. He's the one who succeeded Kenneth III, if you've ever heard of him.

[8 : 31] And then, he himself was then succeeded by Duncan, as in Shakespeare's Macbeth, who was succeeded by Macbeth the king, who was a genuine king. So, you know, a thousand years ago, you get all these ancient or semi-mythological figures who are kings of Scotland at the time.

Malcolm II's name, or his subtitle, was The Destroyer. So, you can just imagine what sort of king he was. But that's a thousand years ago. And we don't really have this taught in our history classes.

We don't really relate to a thousand years ago in Scotland. But a thousand years in biblical history here, it's almost, you know, it says a watch in the night.

It's like the blink of an eye, almost. The turning of a few pages. But here we have Ruth then. Coming into Bethlehem. Why is she coming to Bethlehem? Because she's coming back with her mother-in-law.

Why is her mother-in-law in Moab in the first place? Because her husband went into Moab in the time of famine. When there was a famine, almost certainly lack of rainfall in Bethlehem and in the Holy Land.

[9 : 37] Most people stayed. But he went off into the land of Moab. Now, you could say on the one hand, he was just looking out for his family. He was looking to provide for them. Doing the best.

What was good. What was right for them. Now, you might have said, but if he was really devout, surely he would stay in the Holy Land. Remember when this is said.

It is said in the days of the judges. When the Holy Land was anything but holy. The days of the judges are amongst the darkest, most brutal and appalling days in the history of Israel at all.

Yes, you've got some really bad kings of Israel and Judah. But the days of the judges were just about the all-time low. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

You read some of the chapters and they are blood-chilling. And to how low and depraved Israelites, never mind the paganites were round about them.

[10 : 37] But the Israelites had sunk. It really gets bad. So, leaving that land may not be such a bad thing to do. Or such a big deal.

If you're dwelling amongst the pagans, not only have you got food for your family. But also, at least the pagans are honest in how bad they are and the gods they worship. The Israelites were meant to be worshipping the true God.

But in fact, every man did that which was right in his own eyes. And there was no king in Israel. So, things are pretty bleak. And now there's a famine.

So, Elimelech, who may or may not have been a devout man. His parents probably were reasonably devout. Because his name means, my God is king.

Elimelech. If you think about what Jesus cried on the cross. Elimelech, my God, my God. That's the beginning of his name. My God. Melimelech means king. So, my God is king.

[11 : 36] So, great. That's a pretty devout name. All that means is that his parents were devout. Maybe he was. Maybe he wasn't. But he goes off into the land of Moab with his two sons.

And he dies. While he's there. And Naomi, his wife then, has her two sons. Who, you could say, you know, despising the word of the Lord, take foreign wives whilst they're across there.

Maybe they thought they were going to have to stay there. Maybe they were just trying to put down words. But at any rate, they take Moabitish wives. Which, of course, God had said his people should not do.

Maybe it's an indication that Elimelech had made good in the land of Moab. That he was comparatively wealthy now. Or that his business had prospered.

Or his flocks or herds had done well in the land of Moab. Because there doesn't seem to have been any difficulty in procuring wives for his sons. Even though, by now, his mother is a widow.

[12 : 35] But she can still manage to find wives willing to marry her sons. So they probably had a reasonable amount of money. To begin with, at least.

But then Malon, who was Ruth's husband. And Kerion, who was Orpah's husband, both dies well. Now, it doesn't matter how well to do you may be.

Or how good your business is. If you lose, first of all, the head of the family. And then the two sons as well. All the breadwinners are taken away in the space of just a few years.

Then that is going to give you, to put it mildly, reduced circumstances. So Naomi now is left with nothing. She has been widowed of her husband.

She's been had her sons taken away from her now. In death, she's got nothing. And this is the context in which she says, Now, just go back to your own families, my daughters-in-law, because I've got nothing for you.

[13 : 32] I'm having to go home. She's going home. Yes, she's heard that there's bread again in the land. Well, they've been there a long time now. Ten years plus. So now that there's food again, the famine is over, they can go home.

But there's nothing much to go back for. Naomi, which name means my sweet one, which is why she says, Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, meaning bitter. For the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.

I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home empty again. Why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?

There's an awful lot of mention of the Lord here now with Naomi. And the likelihood is that perhaps having realised that going off to live in the land of the Moabites for ten years was not the most devout and faithful thing to do.

Marrying foreign wives was not the most devout and faithful thing to do. And now it has all rebounded on her. Here she is, thrice widowed, you might say. And so she's got nothing.

[14 : 36] She's left with nothing. And it's often when people have nothing, when they come to the end of themselves, I was reading the other day, someone said, when you come to the end of yourself, is often when people come to the beginning of God.

They turn to the Lord in time of extremity. And it may be that Naomi has stirred up, or her dormant faith has been stirred up to recognise, yes, this has come upon us.

Family and their judgement and so on. One reason, of course, why there might have been famine in the land was as judgement for all the evil that was going on in the days of the judges. When we read of the famine and the drought in the days of Elijah, it is called for specifically because of the evil in the land.

So it's quite possible that one reason why the drought and the famine had come in the land was because of the wickedness that was going on in the days of the judges. But here she is. It is nevertheless under the sovereignty of God that in the famine, in the drought, Elimelech has been taken out of the Holy Land, and that there his sons have married these Moabitish women, and with their deaths, Naomi and her daughter-in-law are brought back into Bethlehem.

Although you could say it's a sin that the sons have engaged in it, nevertheless the Lord has overruled it for good. Because we see, if we look, of course, to Matthew chapter 1 and the genealogy of Jesus there, we see that Ruth has a unique part in it.

[16 : 10] She is named specifically as a late-gerid she. She is not the only stranger wife who's named there. Her own mother-in-law, Rahab, of course, was a Canaanite from Jericho, and likewise we subsequently find Bathsheba also named there, and so on.

But Ruth clearly is intended by God to be a link in the chain, a unique link in the chain. And he has done whatever is required to bring her into Bethlehem, and to bring her into contact with Boaz, but also to bring her into that relationship with her mother-in-law, whom she clearly loves, which will bring her likewise under the shadow of his waist.

Because they don't have to recognise it. That almost certainly, although, yes, she becomes subsequently a devout woman, it is her relationship with her mother-in-law, whom she loves dearly, which is her introduction to the God of Israel.

Because, you know, treat me not to leave here, to return from following after thee, for whether thou goest, I will go, whether thou lodgest, I will lodge, thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God.

She doesn't say, your God is now my God. She doesn't say, I already believe, let me go back to the land of Jehovah, the God of Israel. But rather, she is clinging to her mother-in-law, she loves Naomi dearly.

[17 : 40] That's a good thing, obviously, in and of itself. But it would appear, that either Naomi was devout to begin with, or else her faith has been, if you like, brought to a new depth of reality, through the bitterness of soul, to which she has been brought.

And Naomi, Ruth is clinging to Naomi, and says, well, whatever it is you believe, I want some of that. Whatever it is you believe, I want to be where you are. Your people will be my people, your God will be my God.

But it's a future tense. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God. It's a future expectation, rather than a present reality.

And yet, it comes to pass, of course, that because she is so faithful, and devoted to her mother-in-law, she behaves herself so wisely, and so modestly, and carefully, and does everything her mother-in-law tells her, because of her respect for her mother-in-law, who teaches and instructs her, in the ways of right behaviour, in the eyes of the Lord, and to be blameless, in the eyes of man.

And so we have it then, that the Lord bringing Ruth into Bethlehem, the house of bread. This city it is now, this city where people, city simply, in those days, would be a town with a wall round about it.

[19 : 08] We mentioned how Bethlehem was built on very steep hills, so it would be a place of comparative refuge. When she comes back, to her own hometown, we read, that it came to pass, when they would come to Bethlehem, and all the city was moved about them.

It is now a place with an offensive wall, round about it. It has grown, since being simply the place, a thousand years previously, when Rachel was buried there.

So she comes into Bethlehem, and they have no means of sustenance, they have no means of survival. The only thing that they are able to do, is Ruth is able to glean, after the harvesters, and what they drop, as they are bounding, carrying a bind, she is able to pick up, strand by strand, stalk by stalk, and Boaz sees her, and he takes pity on her, and he makes sure that she is provided for, and so on.

And in due course, we must come to suppose, that he not only does his duty, in terms of looking after, but also falls in love with her as well. We can probably take that, as being part of the story, although it is not written as a love story, it is written simply as two people, doing that which is righteous, in the sight of the law.

But he probably does fall in love with her, as well. But almost certainly, Boaz is an older man. He probably has already, if he is not widowed perhaps, he has a wife, and children, probably sons.

[20 : 38] Because when, if you remember, if you go on through the book of Ruth, the gentleman who is the, the first kinsman, who has the primary claim, he says, well, I can't marry her, because then I might harm my own inheritance.

In other words, if, if I have sons with her, and then it becomes, her dead husband's inheritance, that my sons inherit, because they're her children, then who's going to take my inheritance?

My own inheritance will then be damaged. Boaz isn't worried about that. That would imply that he already has sons, probably from a previous marriage, a first marriage, who will inherit his own business, his own lands, his own titles, and so on.

So he's not worried in that regard. So he marries Ruth, and in due course, of course, she has Obed. Obed, who is the father of Jesse. Jesse, who is the father of David the king, as you see at the end, of the book of Ruth there.

So Bethlehem becomes significant again. It becomes significant again after a thousand years, because it hasn't been mentioned in all the interim, in the biblical record.

[21 : 47] It becomes significant after a thousand years, firstly, because the house of bread runs dry. There's no food in the place, which is quite a little left, and his family go out from there.

And then the bread comes back again, and then the bountiful times come back again, and back comes this widowed Moabite woman, who in due course behaves herself so wisely and faithfully, and her connection to Naomi is what gives her the connection to Boaz, who then marries her, and takes her into his own household, and she becomes his wife.

She produces her son, Obed, who produces her son, Jesse, who, as an old man in the days of Saul, became his father to the future King David. And so the Lord fits all of this into this comparatively small location, a small, seemingly insignificant location, where all these momentous things happen.

But they happen at a huge distance apart from each other. The biblical history is almost like some concertina of time. So you're seeing the kind of rigid in the concertina, you're seeing the bits that really matter, and all the kind of space in between, we don't have any record of.

But God knows all about it. You see, do we take it that Ruth knew when she had the baby Obed, and thought, oh yes, this is such a significant child, because I know who his son will be.

[23 : 17] His son will be the father of the great King David. There weren't any kings in Israel at this point. She would be delighted and happy that she had a baby with Boaz.

She would be even more delighted it was her son, to be an heir, and so on, and to take the place of Malon, her dead husband, and to enter into whatever was his, and that which was Elimelech, and so on.

And so they've got posterity. That's what she'd be happy about. It's highly unlikely, she thought, in terms of, oh yes, he's going to be somebody else's father, and somebody else's father.

If she was still alive when Jesse was born, it is highly unlikely she was still alive when David was born. You know, would the parents, or the grandparents, let's say, the grandparents of Charles Spurgeon, or Martin Lloyd-Jones, have thought, oh yes, this baby we've just had, it's going to be the mother, or the father, of this significant person, that's going to be so used of the Lord.

No, they wouldn't think that at all. Nevertheless, they would be a unique, and indispensable part, of God's scheme of salvation. The point is here, that obscure, as the little town of Bethlehem is, Ruth would have lived out her days, and died, no doubt, maybe there was more children, maybe there wasn't, maybe Obed was the only one that she had with Boaz, but the point is, she would have lived, and died, not knowing, the significance, of the part, that she had played.

[25 : 00] That part, which is, recorded for posterity, in the genealogy of our Lord, in Matthew chapter 1, of which Ruth herself, would have been, we must assume, ignorant.

She would have lived, and died, thinking that the significance, of her life, consisted only, in securing a husband, which would keep her mother-in-law, safe, with a loop over her head, produced a son, which meant, there was somebody, to inherit the name, and the possessions, of her husband, and her father-in-law, and so on.

She would not, have known, or thought, about the place, that she would play, in subsequent generations, even with, the birth of her great-grandson, she wouldn't have a clue, that he was ever going, to become king.

She certainly, wouldn't have had, any knowledge, of the place, she would play, in the story, of the Messiah, who was to come. But, is this not so, with so many of us?

We have not a clue, how our lives, will end up, being significant, in God's scheme, of salvation. We look at ourselves, and we see our, obscure little location, perhaps.

[26 : 14] We see our, obscure little lives, and we think, well I'm not significant. I haven't done anything special. But who knows, what our children, our grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, may go on to do, or to become, or to be used, with the Lord, who knows, how many souls, in Africa, or whenever, were touched, by the ministry, of David Livingston.

And the place, in which David Livingston's, grandparents, played in that, they didn't go to Africa, but they produced, a child, who produced, a child, who went, and became a missionary, that touched the lives, and helped, to save the souls, of so many countless thousands.

You see, the point is, none of us know, we may live, and we may die, not knowing, the significance, that our life, will have played, and the part, that our life, and our calling, will have played.

The point is, none of it, would have happened, at all, if Ruth, had not come, to trust, as Boaz said, in verse 12, of chapter 2, the Lord recompense, thy work, and a full reward, be given thee, of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings, thou art come to trust.

If she had not done so, God's scheme of salvation, would not have unfolded, through her. Whatever else, we may, or may not do, or achieve, in our lifetime, the significance, of which, will not be unfolded, until eternity, demonstrates it, and then I know, it's a cliché, but only eternity, will declare, the significance, of this brief span, of years, the Lord has given us, and the location, where he has called upon us, to live out these years, and to serve these times.

[28 : 02] Only the Lord, will know the full story, but the point is, none of it, will be of significance, until and unless, we put our trust, under the shadow, of his life.

All the souls, that are used, of the Lord, in this way. All the souls, that have their place, of significance, it is only because, they have put their trust, in the living, and true God.

It is so, for Ruth. It became so, for Naomi. It became so, for Jesse, and David. It became so, ultimately, with the scheme, of salvation, that is fulfilled, in our Messiah.

and if we would be, of significance, it may not be, in our lifetimes, but if we would be, of significance, then the only thing, we can do, to guarantee that, is to make sure, that we put our trust, in the living, and true God.

The God, of this world, the Father, of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and to take, our place, in his, great scheme, of redemption, in which Bethlehem, plays, such, a significant part.

[29 : 15] Let us, this world. In this world, it successfully, is to be recognized, and I will, will pass, to be a country, to be a solution to this, in terms of ω...

and thirdly. And lastly, will you enjoy, or ... Where? And do us, which Seth has, when I put one act,