
James Philip Bible Readings

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James Philip Bible Readings

THE BOOK of Ruth

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THE BOOK of Ruth

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The Book of Ruth is a lovely pastoral idyll, reflecting country life and manners in Israel in the time of the Judges. It stands in vivid contrast to the dark and troubled times with which Judges deals, reminding us that in the darkest days God has never left Himself without witness. It's a story of great friendship between the women, Naomi and Ruth, become the vehicle and instrument of the divine purposes. One of the designs of the book is to trace the descent of David, and thus, ultimately, the promised Messiah, Christ.

I) I:I

The opening verse of the book locates the action of the story before us as being in the time of the Judges. One has, but to dip into Judges here and there to recognise the lawlessness and disorder of that time, one of the darkest periods in the history of the people of God, well summarised in the words of the last verse of that book, 'Every man did that which was right in his own eyes' (Judges 21:25). This being so, it is all the more striking that we should find such a marvellous story as this, set in such a dark period like a bright jewel lying on a dark backcloth, gleaming and sparkling with beauty. What is it supposed to teach us? We could read it simply as a love-story (which it is, and as such, a literary gem); but it does not stand on record in the Word of God merely because it is a love story (we say 'merely', because being a love story has its significance, as we shall see, with lessons to be learned on that level and in that realm). Its real point and purpose can be discovered if we look at its last few verses (4:17ff), for there we are given the family tree of David. Ruth, then, is a story of the ancestry of the royal line. But not only so: it is a story about the real point of there being a King David - i.e., that he was the ancestor of his Greater Son, Jesus. Its ultimate relevance, therefore, lies in the unfolding of the overall divine pattern and purpose of redemption in the world. Ruth, the Moabitess, is gathered into the line of promise which stretches from Adam to Christ.

2) 1:1

Immediately when we speak of the line of promise, the whole story begins to gleam with significance. We have repeatedly pointed out in our Old Testament studies that one of the most important things we need to do is to try to relate any particular book we may study to the general, over-all pattern and plan of God in effecting the redemption of the world. The significance of this particular love story, and that which makes it the Word of God, lies in the fact that God takes it up and makes use of it, to further His purpose of redemption for the world. We should not miss the implications of this, in practical terms. A love story, lovely and romantic though it be, is nevertheless an everyday, ordinary occurrence. But God takes ordinary people, and ordinary, work-a-day situations and gathers them into His mighty sovereign purposes. This surely underlines the importance of obedience to God, and doing the right thing by God in the ordinary run-of-the-mill happenings of daily life. This is the great thing about our God: we may never know just what significance an ordinary little act of obedience in daily life may have in His over-all sovereign purposes. We must therefore ever beware of getting into an attitude of thinking that it cannot make much difference whether we are obedient in any particular matter or not, or that no one will know the difference it will make. There is not a single act of obedience to which we are summoned in the Christian life that may not be fraught with the most incalculable consequences for good in the kingdom of God.

Here, then is a story, a very human story, in which there lies sorrow, bereavement, heartbreak, disillusionment, despair and bitterness, and we see the purpose of God interwoven through it like a golden thread. God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.

3) 1:1

A second look at the genealogy in 4:17ff prompts us to compare it with that in Matthew 1; and this gives it its full setting, so to speak, in our Lord's genealogy. The Scripture does not conceal anything in Jesus' family tree: it names and tells the story of those whose lives were stained with sin - Tamar (Genesis 35), of whom Peres was born, Rehab the harlot (Joshua 2), who became the wife of Salmon, and whose son was Boaz, Bathsheba, with whom David committed so great a sin. There is much for reflection here: all this was part of what it meant for the Son of God to be made sin for us, while remaining Himself sinless. How inextricably involved He became with the human race in its sin! But also, what encouragement this should give us to believe that God's election of us is able to triumph over all our ugly and sordid past, and save us into meaning and purpose and hope.

How have we lived our Christian lives today? Have there been duties that have been neglected, or acts of obedience gladly undertaken for Christ's sake? Little ordinary things - a cup of cold water, it may be, a kind word- these are the stuff that God uses in the furtherance of His plans and purposes in the world. So much depends on our right reaction. With Ruth, the important thing was her moral and spiritual attitudes, and how she reacted in various situations, for it was through right reactions that she was led step by step into the wonderful experience of blessedness which became hers. This bears out very clearly what we see in other parts of Scripture, that when God is intent on fulfilling His purposes through us, He never merely makes use of us as ciphers. He treats us as people, and blesses and enriches our lives immeasurably when He uses us as instruments of His purposes. He is no man's debtor.

4) 1:1-5

The opening verses set the scene of the story. They record how a family from Bethlehem felt themselves compelled by famine to leave home to sojourn in the land of Moab. If the theme of the book of Judges be any indication, we may assume that the famine has been brought upon the land because of the unfaithfulness and sin of the people. The Lord's hand was evidently heavy upon them, as had so often been the case for many generations. The first question that arises here is whether they were wise to have left their own land because of the famine. This is not the first time that Scripture records God's people leaving Canaan for such a reason. Abraham did so, and got himself into serious trouble (Genesis 12:10ff), as also did Jacob (Genesis 46), with incalculable consequences for the chosen people. Egypt, whether literal or metaphorical, is not a place for the people of God to be sojourning in, at any time. One wonders then, whether Elimelech and his family should have gone to Moab at all. Further on in the story we are told about Boaz, who did not leave when the famine came but stayed, and God blessed and prospered so that when Naomi and her daughter-in-law finally returned in penury and in need, they found their kinsman Boaz a rich and prosperous man. Has this something to say to us in relation to another kind of famine, spiritual famine in the Church? When such conditions prevail in the Church - as they do, alas from time to time - some have thought that the right thing to do is pull out and separate themselves, and look for food elsewhere. But it is not unknown for such people, who have separated themselves in all good faith, to begin to be sorely perplexed to see the hand of God at work in a denomination that they thought had been cast off by God, blessing and renewing His people. This is something to think about for those who lightly and uncritically assume that the right thing to do is to withdraw when famine conditions prevail. We must beware of setting human limits on God's willingness to restore again the years that the locusts have eaten.

5) 1:1-5

We are told in v4 that the exiles dwelt in Moab about ten years. One is prompted to remark that that is a longish time for a famine to last! It could scarcely have gone on for so long. But having gone down there they became settled in a strange land, where they had really no right to be. And being there, complications arose. Naomi's two sons were of marriageable age, and they naturally looked for wives; and since there were no Israelite women in Moab, Moabitesses were the obvious choice. But the Scriptures have a good deal to say about mixed marriages. The whole question of Israelites marrying outwith the covenant is a serious one; and what happened with the sons of Naomi bears witness to the solemn truth that when once we take a wrong step, we have to go on taking other wrong steps, and there is no saying where the process will finally lead to. It is interesting that ancient Jewish commentators themselves put this interpretation on what happened: 'They (Naomi's two sons) transgressed against the decree of the words of the Lord and took to themselves strange wives.' There is no sign that Naomi objected to their action. One reflects that a truly religious and faithful upbringing would have laid such a foundation and create such an influence that it would have been impossible for Naomi sons to have even considered such a union. Parents have the privilege and responsibility of creating tastes for good and distaste of evil in their families; but if they are out of joint and out of place, their power to influence their children diminished accordingly.

6) 1:6-13

The sadness and misfortune that overtook the hapless family must have been shattering to them (3, 5). Later in the chapter (20, 21) Naomi explicitly states that the Lord had done this in chastisement upon her, so that we are not really open to put any other construction on the situation. Here, then is the sad and mournful unfolding of what happens when we withdraw ourselves from the will of God in doing so we withdraw ourselves also from his protection. That being so, anything could happen to us.

In 6, however, there comes a tardy recognition on Naomi's part of where she ought to be. Ten years is a long time to be away from the Promised Land avoiding a famine. Sorrow may have made her see things in a different light. It does not always have this blessed effect of course, but sometimes it does. Her attitude in these verses is almost reminiscent of the Prodigal's in Luke 15: 'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger?' So they set out together to return to Judah, 'pilgrims bound for the Promised Land'. What is said by Naomi to her daughter-in-law afford us a useful parable and illustration of the Christian pilgrimage, as she enumerates the difficulties and hardships of the onward way - the loneliness, the lack of earthly prospects, the cost of going on. The reference in 11 is to the Jewish custom of Levirate marriage, of which we shall read more in chapter 4 (cf Deuteronomy 25:5). Naomi's point is to underline the futility of invoking that ancient law in this situation since, even if she were to marry again, and have more sons, Ruth and Orpah could hardly wait for them till they were of marriageable age. Naomi's sense of desolation is very real in these verses, but sorrow has sanctified her at least in some measure; she is not so selfishly absorbed in her woe that she cannot consider the interests of her daughters-in-law. And that is, in such circumstances, no mean achievement!

7) 1:14-22

Naomi words to her two daughters-in-law were in the nature of a test for them - not a conscious one, so far as Naomi was concerned, but a test nevertheless; and they sifted the two girls. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and went back, but Ruth determined to remain with her. What was it that made Orpah go back? Well, the situation and the prospects for the future were placed plainly before the two young widows: going back to Bethlehem-Judah was a very unknown quantity, and it might well have meant ostracism for them. It most probably meant, on any reasonable human estimate, a life of drudgery for them, looking after an ageing mother-in-law. On the other hand, returning to Moab had the promise of brighter pastures and a clearer road, with marriage and security as real possibilities. Orpah made a very human and natural choice, one that was obvious on any logical estimate. Ruth, seeing the same issues, just as clearly as Orpah, chose differently, however; and the only adequate explanation is that a secret seed had been planted in her heart by the Spirit of God. It is very wonderful to ponder that, even in the context of this family of God's people being out of His will, there was clearly a testimony in their home, and that Ruth had seen the marks of the God of Israel in their lives. And, in spite of their declension, and their being in God's second best all those years, she was drawn to Israel's God. Ruth's words in 16 and 17, well-known and moving as they are, merit more detailed treatment, and this we shall turn to in the next Note. In the meantime we simply underline that they constitute her testimony to a genuine conversion to God which was clearly firm and steadfast, as 18 indicates. Naomi recognised the signs, and pleaded with her no more. For Ruth, the die was cast and she would go forward - into destiny.

8) 1:14-22

One could hardly find a clearer or more unequivocal statement of commitment than Ruth provides in 16, 17. She really cast in her lot with the people of God, identifying herself with them in every way: their fortunes were to be her fortunes, their sufferings her sufferings, their lot her lot. When a soul speaks in such language to the Saviour, something great and wonderful has happened - a new life has been born of the Spirit of God. It is very lovely to see this thing of beauty emerging out of the backsliding and sorrows - and bitterness too - of this family situation. Surely it bears witness to the sovereignty of God turning to good the sins of men, and from such a series of lapses and tragedies fulfilling His ageless purposes. It is not without significance for us that furtherance and fulfilment was accomplished through such a dedication and commitment as Ruth had. Whenever and wherever a full and absolute self-surrender to God is made the doors of heaven are opened for heavenly traffic to issue forth- God's purposes begin to come into their own. We may well ask ourselves whether as Christians we are as irrevocably committed to Christ as Ruth was to the God of Israel.

9) 1:14-22

Naomi's return to Bethlehem was in much bitterness of soul, as we see in 20, 21. If she had but known it, however she was now, for the first time in years, in a place of blessing. The words in 22, 'the beginning of the barley harvest' are surely symbolic, for God's time of harvest was dawning for Naomi and her family, a harvest that had been sown in tears and now to be reaped in joy. 'I went out full' in 21 are significant - this was the whole trouble with Naomi, she was too full - too full, we fear of herself. It is difficult to avoid the impression, in reading the book that Naomi was a very managing sort of person; and the trouble with such people is that learning the needful lessons of life is often uphill work for them. God has to empty us before He can fill us with His blessing. Was she not thus emptied of self so that He could really bless her with blessings greater than she could at that time comprehend? And is this a key to something in our (heart-sore) experience?

10) 14-22

The Rev. William Still writes: 'Naomi is fully aware that the Lord has dealt with her in judgment, and facing it with courage and returning home she saves herself from that uncomprehending despair which envelops all who in misfortune believe in nothing beyond chance and blind fate. The judgment of bereavement cannot be reversed, in returning home she is at least removing herself from the targets area of the divine judgment. And although certain judicial losses cannot be recovered, there are always some blessings remaining, upon which the merciful Lord can gain a foothold to restore the prosperity of a penitent soul: Naomi had a devoted daughter-in-law, it was the beginning of the barley harvest, and Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's. If not always at once, it is not long before the returned backslider finds the Lord working on his remnants of good, according to the silent plans of His love. And good is good, however small it be, for it has relations with all the good in the universe.'

11) 1-3

We are now introduced to Boaz, the kinsman of Naomi's husband. Another look at the genealogy in 4:18-22 and 1 Chronicles. 2:1-11 will suffice to place him, so far as the line of promise and the divine purpose unfolded in the book of Ruth are concerned. There are two points to note. The first is that he is spoken of as 'a mighty man of wealth'. In spite of the lean years (but could the famine have lasted ten years?) he had remained in his place, and had finally prospered. From which we may learn that even lean years in the will of God prove far more enriching in every way than any other alternative out of it. 'Wealth' is rendered in some versions as 'valour', and the word may refer to moral as well as material wealth. One commentary suggests that a possible equivalent to the phrase in modern terms would be 'knight'. Boaz certainly is a 'knightly and gentlemanly figure'. The second point lies in the significance of his lineage. His mother was Rahab, who used to be Rehab the harlot. In the cold and friendless world in which we live, it is often, well-nigh impossible to live down a background such as Boaz had. It would not matter to some that she had been converted to God - the stigma would remain, so far as they were concerned, and would be there for good. They would never allow her to forget it; and doubtless there would be some who would never allow Boaz to forget it either. But Boaz not only lived it down, he triumphed gloriously over it. This is so important that we must spend another day considering its implications.

12) 2:1-3

The nature of Boaz's background, and the stigma attached to it could well have followed him all through his life. When this happens lives become sour and bitter, and permanent harm is often done to them. Psychiatrists tell us that this is the kind of background that makes for problem lives which are characterised, sometimes by a mean and grasping spirit, sometimes by a drunkenness of spirit that has no redeeming characteristics. But here is a man with such a background, whose end-result is very different: he appears as one of the most gracious, kindly and gentlemanly people that we find anywhere in Scripture. What is the explanation? This: the grace of God had broken into that heritage which, we must admit, might humanly speaking have given rise to all kinds of psychological problems and hang-ups, crippling him emotionally, psychologically and even morally. Sadly enough, one has ample evidence in pastoral work of believing that backgrounds of trouble and difficulty in the home do indeed leave marks and scars that time itself does not heal. But, lest we should be tempted to accept such a pattern as inevitable, God has recorded the story of Boaz for us in Scripture. This is in much need of being remembered today. The grace of God can heal lives that have been marked by backgrounds of this nature, and can turn lives that have, humanly speaking, everything against them, into lovely and beautiful things, and lift them to high levels of living. There is no background, no family inheritance or influence, over which the grace of God cannot prevail.

13) 2:4-17

The quality of the man's character comes through very clearly in v 4. One is prompted to remark that if we had even some of this spirit obtaining between management and labour today, the entire industrial scene would be transformed! The point is not, of course, that we should go around the office or the shop floor mouthing pious phrases: it is something in the quality of the life that communicates the blessing. This is how it was with Boaz; and one is prompted to wonder whether the richness of his life bears any relation to his having stayed at home during the hard times of famine. We are all good at avoiding pressures and edging out of unpleasant situations, but what if the right thing to do were to stay in the midst of them and suffer them, however much it might cost us, in the glad consciousness that God will use them to do something in us, for good?

Boaz's question in 5 was a natural one, but we must not misunderstand it, and the force of Ruth's action in going to his field (2) needs to be appreciated. Ruth and Naomi had returned to Bethlehem empty: they were penniless, and there was no Social Security in those days. Something had to be done. It was providential, in the first instance that the time was the beginning of the barley harvest - it would have been hard for them if the harvest had been over. But if there was no Social Security, there was something else: the merciful provision by a compassionate God for the needs of the poor, enshrined and enacted in the levitical ordinances (Leviticus 19:9, 10; Deuteronomy 24:9-22). This is certainly not a question of the poor getting the 'left-overs' - the corner of the field was left on purpose, as God's provision for them. Doubtless Naomi had instructed Ruth in the laws of Israel, so that when she went out to glean she did not go in any surreptitious way, but as of right: it was the recognised right of the poor and the widow to do so, and one that Boaz would be swift to honour.

14) 2:4-17

We may well ask how it was that Boaz particularly noticed this strange girl glean- ing in his field. Was it a question of love at first sight? It could be. We must not be so spiritually minded as to exclude that thought from a Bible reading, or so holy that we become inhuman! But, although it may well be that Ruth was a very handsome girl, the thing that attracted Boaz to her was not her looks, but what he had heard of her (11). Some commentators suggest that Boaz's language in v 11 is reminiscent of that used of his own progenitor Abraham when he left Ur of the Chaldeans, and that he may in fact have thought of Ruth's action in leaving her own people in such terms. He knew the quality of her consecration to the God of Israel, and what it had made her do and what it had wrought in her. They were therefore two kindred spirits, for he was a man in whose heart God's grace had wrought similarly. There is an important lesson here for us: 'bibli- cal pattern of match-making', it is the quality of consecration, and of what God has been allowed to do, in a girl's life that will attract the right man. And she will not need to at- tract him: God sees to that. In this, as in so many other aspects of Christian life, it is when we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness that the 'other things' are added. The attraction of kindred spirits in the life of discipleship and consecration is something very lovely and beautiful, and it has the virtue of being something that is like- ly to be a lasting attraction.

15) 2:4-17

These verses also unfold the working of the kindly providence of God on Ruth's and Naomi behalf. The seeming coincidences recorded in 2 and 3 are evidence of the good hand of God upon them, and all that followed serves to underline this. The provision made for them was a generous and bountiful one, and must have gladdened and encouraged their hearts. It would be a useful exercise to read, in conjunction with this passage, some of the hymns on Divine Providence in the Church Hymnary, especially words like 'God moves in a mysterious way' (RCH 31) and 'God is love' (RCH 33).

Nor is it difficult to take the words of 8 and 9 out of their context, and spiritualise them. Here is a lord of the harvest speaking to one of the reapers, 'Let thine eyes be upon the field'. Jesus said, 'Lift up your eyes and look on the fields; for they are white already unto harvest' (John 4:35). Boaz's words, 'Have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee' reflect the sovereign care and protection granted to His labourers by the merciful Lord of the harvest. The words 'When thou art athirst, go unto the vessels and drink...' remind us that though there are many thirsty days on the field, God has His wells of salvation, and His ample provision for all our needs. We could lay these verses over against our Lord's commission to His disciples in Matthew 10 or Mark 16:15ff. The divine provision, the divine enabling, the divine protection - is not this wonderfully reassuring? We need have no fear when we go forth to serve Him.

16) 2:18-23

Matthew Henry suggests that the question in 19, 'Where hast thou gleaned today?' is a good one to ask our souls at the end of each day. Have we been about the Master's business? Or has it been a day or wasted hours?

We see from 20 that it is at this point that the light began to break for Naomi. She began to see something of God's dealings with her, and realised that out of the black darkness of despair and bitterness God can bring light and hope and grace, and that even by the most apparently trivial circumstances a whole new situation can arise fraught with significance and opportunity. It is here that we see the bigness of God's ways and purposes. He does nothing little! And even to be an insignificant actor in the great drama of redemption is a great thing. O to have a greater consciousness of this! All this imparts a thrill and a wonder to the spiritual life. One just never knows what is going to happen next, for the providence of God works secretly on, guiding and directing all the way that we take, silently planning in love for us. It may well be that some trivial circumstance that has happened to us today may change the whole course of our lives, because God has been at work in it. Ruth's happening upon Boaz's field (3) ways certainly fraught with immense consequences, not only for her, but for the world!

17) 3:1-13

The background of this strange and perplexing chapter is the Jewish custom of what is called levirate marriage (cf Deuteronomy 25:5-10). The word derives from a Latin word meaning 'husband's brother'. This ancient law, traces of which go back as far as Genesis 38:8ff, provided that when a married man died without a child, his brother was expected to take his widow and raise up a seed for his dead brother, who would become the legal heir of the dead man's property. Underlying this law (caricatured so perversely by the Sadducees in Luke 20:27ff) was the very strong desire to preserve the family name. Family ties were extremely strong and sacred in Israel, as was the desire on the part of Israel's womankind to have family. Alongside the reference in Deuteronomy we need to place another, in Leviticus 25: 25-30, which indicates that the custom had wider application, as may be seen in the next chapter of our story (4:3ff). When the widow of a childless man desired to sell his estates, his next of kin was obligated to buy or redeem it of the widow. The property was thereby kept in the family. Custom was also urgent that the kinsman 'voluntarily assume levirate duties' and take the woman to wife, if he would not thereby endanger his own inheritance. It was considered magnanimous so to do, and a mark of loyalty to the family. It was therefore regarded as a matter of course, and a matter of right, that a widow should appeal to her near kinsman to perform this duty, in the case of the family, and in the case of the property and land requiring to be redeemed. From this point of view, what is recorded in this chapter was accepted custom.

18) 3:1-13

Naomi's whole background provided a driving force for her to redeem the 'reproach' of her family. With such a background we can imagine how difficult it was for her to rest until her daughter-in-law's interests had been attended to. The RSV rendering of 1 brings out her concern very graphically: 'should I not seek a home for you...?' This was part of the merciful and humanitarian legislation in the Mosaic code, in its provision for the poor.

If these things were not known, this chapter might read more than a little like a passage from a somewhat dubious modern novel that had some unsavoury thoughts associated with it. But with the background of the passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, it reads rather differently. Even so, it has greatly perplexed commentators how to justify Naomi's actions in inveigling Ruth into such a situation. They have been at pains to suggest that there was nothing unusual or unworthy about what Naomi arranged here for her daughter-in-law and that in the light of the law it was perfectly natural. But there is nothing in Deuteronomy or Leviticus, or anywhere else, for that matter, to suggest that this was the way for the law concerning the kinsman to be 'worked out and fulfilled'. Granted it was the law of Moses that Boaz should be a husband to Ruth; granted she had a right to claim his protection; granted Naomi was within her rights in expecting that this arrangement would receive the blessing of the Lord - but why create such an embarrassing situation, for Ruth and for Boaz too, and one that but for God's over-ruling grace might have led to serious repercussions? Was it necessary to have approached Boaz in this secretive way, that could well have caused scandal? Does the answer to these questions lie in what some maintain about Naomi -that she was a very 'managing' person, and that, whether deliberately, or by an instinct that was 'second nature' to her, she was seeking to 'force God's hand' in the whole matter? We shall consider this further in the next Note.

19) 3:1-13

There are some people who by nature take a delight in managing other people's affairs. With the best will in the world, we find it difficult to escape the conclusion that Naomi was such a person. We can hardly conclude, on the basis of the Mosaic legislation, that her action was necessary. All that needed to have been done was for Naomi to send word to Boaz and ask him, as near kinsman to Ruth, to do his duty by her. What we know of Boaz is surely sufficient for us to assume that he would certainly not have been slow to respond to such a request. He was not the kind of man who would brush off family responsibilities and evade them. Naomi was precipitate, and she was precipitate because she did not really trust God to manage the affair without her help and interference, and did not trust Boaz to do his duty without her conniving unworthily to oblige him to do so. The story of Ruth would have read better, if this chapter had not needed to have been written. It is little wonder that Boaz was afraid (8). Interestingly - and this seems to bear out the interpretation we have placed on the situation - an old Jewish commentary draws a parallel with the story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, and suggests that Boaz was afraid because that ancient story came into his mind. There is, of course, no ground for suggesting anything of the sort; but the tradition serves to show that even ancient Jewish scholars had misgivings about Naomi's scheming. It can hardly be right, therefore, to maintain that what she did was a well-recognised ritual.

The lessons here are considerable. Naomi could not keep her hands off the situation, and she was taking no chances. She had already confessed that the Lord was at work in all this (2:20) - why then, did she not leave the Lord to do His own work in His own way? Did she really think that God needed her help, and that He did not know best how to arrange His own purposes?

20) 3:1-13

God knows how to fulfil His own good and perfect will; and He knows how to make love matches too, without our meddling in them! One has only to think of some of the divinely ordained matches one has known to realise that the hallmark in them has been an inevitability, a smoothness and an openness about them that put them beyond any doubt. That is how God works. He does not bungle things. In His arrangements there is no need for people or circumstances to be manipulated by meddling human hands.

Looking at it at its best, we may say this: perhaps Naomi was a misguided woman who unwittingly committed this foolish mistake. But it was a mistake; and we often make mistakes like this in all sorts of different circumstances, doing a right thing in a wrong way. We must learn better than to do right things in wrong ways; we must learn to trust God more deeply and fully otherwise trouble is going to follow.

All this having been said, the important point now, in 8ff, is to see how Ruth and Boaz react. Boaz's recognition of Ruth's quality and worth is very impressive (10). The implication of his words should be understood: Ruth had not followed young men, either poor or rich (to whom she must undoubtedly have been very attractive) but rather the older Boaz because of family loyalty. Indeed, she put this before any personal consideration. This is what impressed Boaz so much. Now, this was essentially a spiritual attitude, associated with her dedication and consecration to the God of Israel, which she allowed to override every human wish or desire, including the possibility of marrying well in Bethlehem. She died to natural advancement in favour of the higher reality. This had Naomi but realised, was more than sufficient to ensure God's best for her - and withal, to make her more attractive than any other girl in Bethlehem (11). Are there not great lessons for young people - and the not-so-young also - to learn here?

21) 3.1-13

Let us think today of the idea of family loyalty. As we have seen, this was something imbedded in the whole ethos of the Israelite people, but it was not meant to be confined to them. It is something that God has planted in the lives of men. It should be recalled that Paul, in Romans 1:31, instances the absence of natural affection as one of the marks of depravity. Family loyalty on the natural level is something very strong and real. It is true that Jesus once said, 'If any man hate not his father and mother... he cannot be My disciple', but we must be careful not to misinterpret or distort these words. Jesus never at any time meant that we should treat our families shabbily, or imagine that because they are not Christians we are therefore entitled to brush them aside or treat them contemptuously. This is a terrible perversion of the truth of God. Family loyalty is a constant, and it is dishonouring to God to set it at a discount. When we put loyalty to Christ first in our lives, it never means that we will love or respect our families less. The same ought to apply within the marriage bond. Too often, in a situation in which one partner is a Christian and the other not, the rift is discussed in public, sometimes very disparagingly. What of the marriage vows? Is this being loving, faithful and dutiful, as a husband or wife? It is one thing to confide these distresses in the confidentiality of a pastoral relationship, but quite another to set them out for display to the public gaze. Ruth was prepared, to her cost, to be loyal to the memory of the husband who had died and to her husband's family.

We may also apply this in the spiritual sense. There is such a thing as family responsibility and family loyalty on the spiritual level, in members of a Christian fellowship or congregation. Are we loyal to one another within this family? Or, do we show contempt for some; do we brush others aside when they are no longer of use to us? Do we betray one another? Are there not things for us to think about here?

22) 3.1-13

It will have been noticed in 12 that Boaz was referring to another relative of Elim-elech's then living in Bethlehem, but surely his words remind us irresistibly of that nearer kinsman, Jesus Christ, Who redeems us as our 'go'el' kinsman from the curse of the law, and undertakes our case and protects us when there is no eye elsewhere to pity, and no hand elsewhere to save. Christ is our Kinsman-Redeemer. This is not to be regarded as fanciful exegesis. One of the points about the story of Ruth is that it is an adumbration, a foreshadowing, of Christ. And a good case could be made out for suggesting that Boaz and Ruth are types of Christ and His bride, the Church. The word 'go'el' is one that is inextricably used in biblical theology in relation to Christ. It is one of the Old Testament words for 'redeemer'. And the kin that exists between this Redeemer and ourselves is established by the covenant of grace. By virtue of that covenant Christ is our kinsman, our elder brother, who steps in our defencelessness and in our need as our protector and champion. In this connection, we should remember that in Boaz's case, the matter could not be settled by his simply saying that everything would be all right. A price had to be paid for the redemption of the piece of land in question. In the same way, Christ could not simply say of the sin problem in humanity that everything would be all right, and leave it there. A word spoken was sufficient to bring the world into being; but it needed a life laid down to recreate a world that was lost in sin. A price had to be paid. Here, then, we have a beautiful illustration and foreshadowing of Christ's redeeming action in the person of this generous-hearted kinsman of Ruth's stepping in to be her champion and protector, and to plead her cause.

23) 3:14-18

To continue the thought at the end of yesterday's reading, it is an easy transition to the idea expressed by Paul in Romans 7:1-6, where he speaks of the believer as 'married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead'. Here is the true 'levitate' marriage, by which we, lost in our sin and broken and helpless, are assumed into a blessed union in which all our deepest needs are met and fulfilled. To pursue the 'spiritualising' still further, we may see a typical significance also in 18b, 'the man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day'. God's sabbath rest was broken by sin, and rest did not come again until Christ said on the cross, 'It is finished'. There was a spirit of restlessness in the heart of Jesus until His redeeming work was accomplished. 'I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened until it be accomplished'.

There is a real danger in 'spiritualising' the Scriptures, it is that we sometimes obscure or miss the primary meaning of what is being said. And we should pay heed to the very human passage contained in 18, for it constitutes a word of encouragement to those who are walking in the perplexing paths of life not knowing what to do next: 'Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall'. It is an exhortation to wait upon the Lord. Ruth was to rest quietly in her uncertainty – not an easy thing to do, one might think, especially in such a situation; but Naomi's words are true. God does not ordinarily allow a love match of His making and arranging to remain in doubt and uncertainty for very long. He is too kind, knowing our frame, and the upper limits of our endurance. We may trust Him to 'perfect that which concerneth us'.

24) 4:1-12

This is a very interesting and fascinating passage from a technical point of view, apart from its spiritual lessons, for it affords us evidence of how legal matters were entered into and dealt with in ancient Israel. The meeting at the gate (1), and the calling of the elders and the people (9) to be witnesses, and the form of attestation (7, 8), are all legal categories belonging to the time. The gate of the city was the public meeting-place where legal and business transactions were carried through, the elders acting, so to speak, as judges. And on this occasion they assumed the responsibility that was theirs, and proceeded to adjudicate on the case that Boaz brought before them. More significant than the technical matter, however, is the spiritual significance of the law of levirate marriage, which we discussed in a previous Note on ch 3, and by which a widow as of right could appeal to the elders of the gate for justice and recognition, and the kinsman required by law both to redeem any land that was sold, to keep it in the family, and also to raise up seed in memory of the dead husband. At first, the kinsman who was nearer of kin to Naomi than Boaz was quite willing to redeem the field - it would be an investment for him, after all (4); but when Boaz proceeds to the next point, viz. that marrying Ruth was also involved he very swiftly retracted, for fear of marring his own inheritance (6), and refused his duty. Now the law was quite clear: it was his duty at nearest kinsman to fulfil this obligation; and in refusing to do so, he was dishonouring the law of God. We shall look at lessons in this in the next Note.

25) 4:1-12

One can almost sense the near kinsman's swift mental calculation as Boaz speaks to him of Naomi position, and as swift a decision when he realises that with the prize of the field there goes the responsibility of Ruth. This is an only too accurate reflection of the attitude of many who are prepared in theory for God's will only so long as it does not inconvenience them or seriously interfere with their own selfish interests. One recalls the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28ff. one said, I go, and he went not; the other refused to do, then in the end went. It was rather like this with the kinsman: first of all he said, I will redeem it; but when he saw what it involved, he had second thoughts. Jesus also said something about the danger of putting one's hand to the plough and then turning back (Luke 9:62), and of starting to build a tower and being unable to finish it (Luke 14:28). This man did not at first count the cost of what he was called upon to do; but when he finally did, he backed out. Are there not Christians who do this today? They are called to do something that costs, something that involves a cross, and they are unwilling - unwilling to face that cost which is the price of truly effectual service.

But there is a price to be paid for not paying the price, and it may be seen in what this near kinsman of Naomi's lost. He is called 'such an one' in 1. He does not even have a name: he is anonymous. His name is not even mentioned in Holy Writ: No glory shines from his memory. His inheritance is to have gone down in history as a man without a name, a man of no significance to God. We may be insignificant people, of little import in the world's eyes, but if we do the will of God, we shall not be forgotten by Him, and shall in no wise lose our reward. 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know', said the evil spirits (Acts 19:15), 'but who are ye?' There is a lot in a name, viewed from this standpoint!

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26) 4:1-12

We spoke in the previous Note of believers refusing to do something that costs. With this man, it was his plain duty that he refused to do. It was not a question of his being called to some dramatic act of heroism. And by failing to do his plain duty, he missed an illustrious part in God's plan of redemption. His refusal of his responsibility was one that involved the glory of being an ancestor of Christ. That is what he missed by being so concerned about his inheritance. Is there not something tremendously challenging here, something that elevates duty to a high dignity? We are not, of course, to be doing our duty before God with a view. But when we fail to do it, we lose out all along the line. Crowns have been lost by people who have neglected their plain duty, who have opted out of what was right, because of prudential considerations. Some Christians have an outlook in life which regards true sacrificial service (performed at the call of duty) as throwing away all one's chances in life and marring one's inheritance. Well, let us look at this unfortunate man: he was unwilling to mar his inheritance, and he refused to accept the challenge of God's word. What is his inheritance now? He is nameless, obscure, unhonoured, unremembered. Jesus said. 'He that saveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it'. These are matters we need to look at from the standpoint of eternity, not of time. From this standpoint the kinsman's loss was irreparable. Let us ask ourselves, in the light of this, whether our name is likely to be remembered - whether, in fact, we are living the life of obedience that will warrant remembrance.

27) 4.1-12

Boaz called the people to witness that he had bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi, and that he had purchased Ruth to be his wife. As an illustration, in type, of our great Kinsman-Redeemer, Boaz foreshadows in his action the fulness of the redemption wrought by Christ and the completeness of the purchase He made, in the death He died and the price He paid in His own blood. In this connection, we should note that it was not merely the inheritance, but also the person of Ruth that was bought. We may recall how Paul speaks in Ephesians 1:14 of 'the redemption of the purchased possession', and in 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20 of the fact that 'ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price'.

It is interesting to note the terms in which the people prayed for blessing upon Boaz and Ruth, in 11. This may have been the common and accepted way of expressing it, but they spoke more truly than they knew, because this union that had been brought about was one destined to be very important and significant in the history of the divine redemption. This is the point of the brief genealogy in 13ff, as it traces Boaz's ancestry from Pharez, the son of Judah, son of Jacob. Ruth was thus incorporated into the royal line of promise, which brought forth in the fulness of the time David's greater Son, Jesus. Both she and Boaz appear in this royal line as those that were obedient to the will and purpose of God, Ruth putting personal considerations aside and maintaining family loyalty, Boaz accepting the obligation of the law and becoming her near-kinsman. They were of course by this time in love with each other; and when romance comes hand in hand with obedience to the will of God, it is one of the many things that God adds to the lives of those who seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

28) 4:13-22

We see in these verses the wheel of Providence turning full circle, as Naomi enters into blessedness and fulfilment. What a wonderful promise and assurance the words of the women gave her in 14 and 15, and how completely they offset and over-ruled her own bitter outburst in 1:20, 21! The place of emptiness truly became a door into blessing for her. When God's purposes are brought to fruition, there is blessing all round, not least on the purely human level, as in Naomi's case, although the primary significance of the story is seen in the part it plays in the plan of the ages. It is wonderful that out of the turmoil of the time of the Judges - one of the darkest in Israel's history - there should issue forth this lovely - and significant - incident. That is how sovereign God is. We must lay hold of the fact that even in the darkest time of moral and spiritual declension we can never assume that God is not working. His purposes will be fulfilled, however dark and improbable the situation. We never know in what quiet and - to us - insignificant corner He may be working something of immense and far-reaching strategic importance for the ongoing and fulfilment of His purposes in the world.

29) 4:13-22

Let us look back, then, and gather a few lessons from this lovely story. One that we must not miss is the glorifying of the ordinary in human life. God puts a high value on the ordinary, and is interested in ordinary things. Indeed, He chooses the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty. This is how dignity comes to Christian living. If we believe that even the ordinary incidentals of our daily lives are somehow, in a way beyond our understanding, caught up in the divine hand - the things we have been, or will be, doing today, ordinary, insignificant things ? Then all of life becomes invested with a dignity and a meaning, giving it a sense of purpose and direction that must evermore redeem it from triviality and irrelevance.

Another important lesson - and herein lies the challenge of the book - lies in the act of obedience on Ruth's and Boaz's part. Obedience to simple duty may have repercussions far greater than any of us could ever realise. Ruth's obedience to duty in leaving her father's house and tying herself to Naomi led her into the royal line - as the kinsman's disobedience led him out of it. God does require of us obedience. Take as an illustration the idea of a commander-in-chief of a large army with many divisions. The plan of campaign is broken up into sections and segments, and by the time it reaches the platoon of twenty men at the front, they may see neither rhyme nor reason in the particular orders they receive. But on obedience to these orders will depend the success of the over-all battle strategy. The commander-in-chief knows what he is about, and he counts on unquestioning obedience at the front, on the part of the twenty men. This is why we must be content to obey God in the darkness, when we do not know what is going on, do not know why this or that pressure is upon us, or this or that of frustration. It should be enough for us that He knows.

30) 4:13-22

One of the most practical and penetrating lessons of all lies the fact that Ruth found personal happiness when she sought something higher than happiness. Happiness is never something that can be found by searching, either this kind of happiness with a loved one, or any other kind. Indeed, the surest way of not finding it is to go all out looking for it. Paradoxically, it can be found only when one stops looking for it, and when one is caught up by something bigger than one's own interests, bigger than one's own happiness. With Ruth it was a sense of duty, the high call of duty. And first of all, she found peace in doing her duty; then happiness stole up upon her and took her by surprise in a most wonderful way. All this should teach us the important lesson that we are here in the world on duty, with a job to do, and that it is in the doing of that job, and that duty, that we shall find the truest happiness, not in the aimless and endless - and selfish - pursuit of it. This, once again, underlines the truth of Jesus's words, that 'he that saveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake the same shall find it'. As is the message of the Cross in different language: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you'. Happiness is one of these 'additions', and it comes only when we have finally surrendered our right to it, and stopped seeking it. Let us not suppose that this made Ruth - or will make us - 'haloed' and unnatural. Ruth was a perfectly normal and human young woman, and as such would normally and naturally have thought of the possibility of another marriage, realised too that she was attractive to many of the young men of Bethlehem (2:9, 3:10). It was simply that she had a higher motivation, and because she had, God gave her His best. He is no man's debtor. 'Them that honour Me', He says, 'I will honour' (1 Samuel 2:30). Herein lies the secret of all that is fruitful, and good, and blessed, in life.