

Introduction to Ruth

Luke 24:13-35

Ephesians 2

Psalm 119:73-80

Over the years we have covered most of the new Testament, having finished up some of the smaller letters there recently I had been thinking its time we go into some of the old Testament books. Initially my thought was maybe going through the minor prophets, just working our way through them over the next few years probably, and that is likely what we will do next, but Diana and suggested Ruth, so it is here that we will start our old testament journey. As we have been reading "According to Plan" by Graeme Goldsworthy, we have been learning about the various different theologies, different ways to look at scripture through different lenses. This becomes important as we study the old testament books, for there are a few ways that we can approach them. As we discussed in Sunday school last week while reading through a chapter in this book, really it is Christ who sets the standard for old testament understanding, as after his resurrection he travels with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus which we read this morning in Luke, they did not recognize him, and as it says in verse 27 "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

This gives a clue to the purpose of the old testament scriptures, these are not just stories, or historical accounts, though they are that as well, but they are telling of something that is coming, telling of the promised one who will bring peace between God and man, and we now know that promised one was Jesus who has fulfilled the law and the prophets and offered himself up for the sins of his people. So anytime we study an old testament book we should be looking for Jesus, asking ourselves what is this telling us about the promised messiah, what is this telling us about ourselves? For we also find out in Paul's writings, that the promises to Abraham, and therefore Israel also has its true fulfillment in those who have been redeemed by Jesus' death on the cross. He promised Abraham his offspring will be like the stars in the sky, or the sand in the seas, innumerable, and again through the new testament authors we learn that this promise is fulfilled in the spiritual children who by faith, believe as Abraham did, in the Son of God who has come to redeem his people.

So, it is important that we understand the old testament through the lens of the new. The revelation of God in his redemption plan has been progressive, where before he spoke through the prophets, foretelling of his arrival, but now that he has arrived, now that he has fulfilled the old testament prophecies we can see and understand them through what we know today. All of the redemptive history of mankind lands on the cross, it was the redemption of those looking ahead, and it is the redemption for us looking back. Last week we read through the heroes of faith in Hebrews, and the author says, all these had died without seeing the promise, but they believed it, they understood that God would provide for himself a sacrifice to pay for the sins of his people. They were looking ahead to the promise in faith, while we are looking back in faith. Having the new testament revelation, the teachings of Jesus himself, and the apostles we can have a much clearer understanding of what God was doing in the old Testament accounts. So though I know that we already all know this and understand this concept of biblical understanding, that we look at the old testament through the lens of the new, I just thought It was important to reiterate it here this morning before we begin this study, for that will be my goal in all of this, to see Christ, to understand the work that God is doing to bring about his salvation to his people, through the lives of these people whom we read about.

This morning we are going to be starting a study through the book of Ruth, the goal of this morning isn't so much to get into the first chapter but the lay out the groundwork, talk a bit about the history, the setting, what was going on during that time so as we work our way through this book we can maybe have a bit better understanding. Not only is it important to understand the old testament through the revelation of the new testament, but to also understand it in the context of which it was written, who the people are that is mentioned, and what is going on. This is also true with any book of the bible which is why when we start a new study I usually spend the first week talking about these things. This book is set in the time of the Judges, somewhere between 1160 and 1100 BC., this was a time of frequent war and idolatry for Israel, who was caught in the middle of a large famine which caused an Israelite family to move to Moab. Already before we even get into the text we can see some restorative biblical themes, faithful people in an unfaithful world wrapped up in turmoil, being driven from their home to live as strangers in a new land, such as are we. The new testament refers to believers as sojourners, travelers, visitors on this earth full of turmoil and sin, awaiting to enter into the promised land, into the presence of our Father.

The time of Judges was a chaotic time for Israel, it spanned roughly a 300 year period before the first King of Israel was established. This 300 years is defined by a repeating cycle of idolatry, foreign oppression, repentance and deliverance. Since there was not centralized leadership in Israel, there was often anarchy as we see even in our own society. With out order, is chaos and Israel was without order, and in a time of chaos. The cycle that repeated itself over and over again for those 300 years is that Israel would abandon God, turn to idols and God would send a foreign power to oppress them bringing about their cry for help of which God would raise up a Judge to deliver them. The term judge is a bit of a misnomer by today's understanding, these were not court judges, but where instead charismatic often flawed military leaders who would defeat the occupation army and create stability in Israel until she would inevitably fall away again repeating the cycle. This 300 year period saw a downward spiral in both spiritual and moral life which ended in chaos and a civil war

So it is in this backdrop that this story exists, let us go ahead and the whole first chapter this morning. This story opens up with tragedy, Elimelech moves his family to Moab to find prosperity while the land of Israel is struck by a famine. Throughout scripture we see God has used famines as a means of discipline of Israel, causing suffering and starvation among the people driving them to repent of their idolatry and return to God. In this time, God was using a famine to discipline the people of Israel for their worship of Baal and Ashtoreth. These two false Gods were from the Canaanite occupation which had been going on for 7 years or so at this point. These were the Canaanite fertility and storm Gods, Baal was seen as the male god of the sun, of storms and rain, and Ashtoreth was the female goddess of fertility, love, and war. It was believed that sexual relations between these 2 Gods is what created fertile ground for crops. The worship of these 2 false deities often involved temple prostitution, and animal or child sacrifice to ensure prosperity. Israel had turned to these gods, were seeking them for their crops, and for prosperity, and God struck them with a famine showing that these gods were false with no power.

This book starts out with Elimelech, Naomi's husband who was a land owner in Bethlehem, which is about 5 miles south of Jerusalem and because of these famines, fell on hard times so he left Israel and took his family to Moab. The Moabites were descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew, born from an incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This account can be found in Genesis 19, where it is recorded that Lot's daughters believed that they were the last people left of their family line, they got their father drunk to preserve their lineage. The oldest daughter bore a son named Moab, whose lineage became the Moabite people.

Despite being related by blood, the offspring of Lot, the nephew of Abraham they were often considered enemies of Israel with a history of conflict between the 2 nations. Also of note, and a bit of history defining the area as well, is that Moab's younger sister bore a son, and he was named Ben-ammi, and was the ancestor of the Ammonites. Which were another group of people who would rise in conflict with Israel. Looking at the bigger picture here, it is interesting to note that Israel was surrounded by a people born of their own bloodline, but who were not her people, and were in constant conflict and disputes over the ownership of the land, which has continued even to this day. Also, interesting thing to note here, is that Elimelech was from Bethlehem, and Jesus was a descendant of David, who was the great grand son of Ruth, this Moabite woman who married Elimelech's son, and as we know, Jesus himself was born in Bethlehem.

One of the things that stands out to me here just in this first chapter is how God works through events, we have in Ruth an example of faith by someone who is not an Israelite but who would not have known God, who would not have come to that belief if it was not for the famine in Israel and Elimelech moving his family to Moab. To sort of simply it, God moved a family to bring salvation to a single foreigner. God brought about the drought as form of punishment for Israel's idolatry, but it also brought about the faith of Ruth. Often times I think we tend to think of things maybe one dimensionally, we see how things effect us, we react to the effect, but there is always a larger event at play. God is the grand master chess player moving pieces and events around us to enact his purpose and will, nothing happens in a vacuum and though we may not see it, or ever see it God is working a purpose and plan.

One thing that has always been impressed upon my mind, is God's working through trials and events, how we don't know how God may use something, even something difficult in our lives to effect others. I think that this is the central point of living a just life, I think that this is what Paul was pressing upon Titus to teach the people of Crete, no matter what happens in life, we remain faithful and that stance, shows God to the world around us. The world's reaction to hardship is like Job's wife's comment to her husband, "do you still hold fast your faith? Curse God and die." But as Job responded, should we receive good from God and not trouble? True faith stands, when all other fails. Ruth remained with Naomi, going into a land of which she was a foreigner and unknown, Ruth's response was wherever you go I will go, your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God.

What was meant to be a short time in Moab, became a stretch of 10 years, and they were a rough 10 years for Naomi, she lost her husband, and her sons. We also should not downplay the significance of the 2 sons marrying these Moabite women, for this was something that was also forbidden for an Israelite, to marry a Gentile. In Deuteronomy 23:3 states, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord' even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord forever." So that begs the question, what is going on here? For 2 men of Israel married 2 gentile women, and one of those women is in the lineage of Jesus. Well, I think the easiest answer to that question, is that it is God who calls his people, we have instances of outsiders becoming people of faith in the old testament, one example is Ruth, another is Rahab who aided Israel's spies and is herself also listed in the genealogy of Jesus. So, we have these examples of outsiders believing the God of Israel, by faith, not by lineage, not by tradition, not by ritual, but by faith.

We can see ourselves in this example, not only because we are gentiles in the traditional sense, but because we were outside the family of God, rebels, sinners, and God moved mountains to bring us to him, he moves families, he drives people away to bring about his purpose. Just looking at our own little group here we have so many examples of this, of God working in our own lives and how it has effected one another. It was controversy and a church split that drove my family to come to Ventura, where I met Diana, without that conflict and difficulty we would have never met, yet God used such a thing so drive our paths to cross. Likewise my family moved to Hamilton, my parents wanted to homeschool, they wanted to get out of the city so they bought some land and built a house...it was because of that move that I met clay, and it was through that in which he met Christina. Likewise issues arose in the church that we were attending at the time which drove Diana and I out, and through some interesting circumstances we ended up here, under the teaching of Vic which changed our lives.

At which time Josh, Jody and family came to visit but ended up attending Harbor for a while, until Vic retired and Josh reached out to us to help us in a time where we had no pastor, and he set up a group of men who would come to teach to us..and it is through that time we developed a friendship with them until they went into the mission field in Mexico, and I am sure they can add accounts and stories of God working though that, but look what happened on this end, Tom living with us for a few years introduced our kids to their family group, and through that Aidan and Sarah are now married, Tom and Jen are married...God had moved a lot of things, we all went through hardships and struggles, to bring us to where we are today. But through it all God was working his purpose and plan in all of our lives. These things always fascinate me, and I find reflecting upon them to be encouraging and helpful because it reminds me of God's control in the seemingly mundane. As we go about our lives making decision about what is before us, God is working through it all to bring about his purpose in our lives.

This is one of the key central themes throughout this book, God's sovereign grace and mercy given to an outsider in a time of trouble, it is a redemption story that mirrors the salvation given to those who believe. This is a story about an unfailing love, loyalty and mercy as Ruth demonstrates by not leaving her mother-in-law Naomi in her own time of distress, and as we go through this book we will see Boaz serves as a kind of redeemer, as he buys up the family land of the deceased relative and marries the widow to continue the family line, a mercy and action that foreshadows and mirrors Christ's role as the ultimate redeemer, as the story shows God working behind the scenes through ordinary human decisions and seemingly coincidental events. Again it is a good reminder of this reality, that God is always working in our lives and his goal and plan for us will not be thwarted.

We like Ruth, were outsiders and foreigners, enemies of God, but by faith and love we have become members of his family, the holy ones as he has given his grace and salvation to us who did not deserve it. Ruth was a Moabite, a people who were traditionally an enemy of Israel, but through faith love, and devotion, was redeemed and counted as one of the people of Israel, as an example of God's own love extending to the outsider, bringing redemption and acceptance as a holy one. And the final theme that we will encounter in this book, is triumph over tragedy. Scripture is full of accounts of tragedy that ends in triumph, which all mirrors the tragedy of Jesus death on the cross, which ended in the ultimate triumph of the salvation offered to his people through that sacrifice. Jesus conquered death, he conquered sin, and made a way for his people to be redeemed and brought into the family of God. Each and every one of us outsiders, brought in through the redemptive work of Christ on our behalf.

And I think that this is the big take away this morning in this sort of overview introduction into this book, is God's sovereignty as he is working in the lives of his people. Using tragedy and calamity to bring about great blessings. A judgment of famine upon the land, brought Elimelech and his family to Moab where his sons met and married, and through the tragedy of their deaths, we see the faith of Ruth who did not forsake Naomi, who did not forsake her faith in God and through generations was rewarded by being listed in the lineage of Christ, an outsider, a gentile woman being included in the lineage of the Messiah. It is a spider web of God's plans being woven together ever so perfectly to bring about his redemption of his people. As we think about the chaos in this world, or even in our own lives at times we must remember who is orchestrating it all for his purpose, and ultimately rest in that reality, that God is at work, bringing about his purpose and will, for his own glory. We don't know how events, or things may play out, we don't know how God may use hardships, or events to bring about faith and belief, or how he uses such to encourage us as he brings about redemption and frees us of afflictions, and answers prayers.

So next week we will start going through this book, looking at these themes and how God works through the lives of these people navigating hardship and dark times all the while remaining faithful and true to God, and to one another.