

Notes on the Book of Ruth - Part 1

by T. Austin-Sparks

The book of Ruth illustrates the importance of faith and obedience to God's principles in overcoming adversity and finding enlargement, establishment, and life.

Topics: "Faith in Adversity", "God's Redemptive Plan"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound themes of faith and redemption in the Book of Ruth, illustrating how God operates through adversity to bring about restoration and life. He highlights the significance of Ruth's story, particularly the key verse about raising the name of the dead upon his inheritance, which encapsulates the essence of God's redemptive plan. Sparks contrasts the tragic circumstances of Elimelech's family with the hope found in God's faithfulness, reminding listeners that even in dire situations, God is at work to restore and provide. The sermon encourages believers to recognize the importance of remaining on God's ground to avoid spiritual famine and barrenness, ultimately pointing to the resurrection as the source of hope and renewal.

Transcript

In a peculiar way, largely because of its comprehensiveness and conciseness, this book sets forth what was brought before us at the beginning of this conference: faith, through adversity, unto enlargement, establishment, and life. That would be so apparent if you could read the little book right through.

If I were to take any particular fragment from this book which I consider to be the key to it, I think I should take from chapter 4, verse 5, the last clause: "to raise the name of the dead upon his inheritance." You could add to that what is in the 15th verse, first clause, "He shall be unto thee a restorer of life." I think everything in the book circles around and finds its focal point in that fragment in verse 5 - "raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance."

By universal consent and accord, this book goes by the name of Ruth. But why not Boaz? He was a man, to begin with, without the slightest suggestion of individual comparison, he was not a woman. He was a wealthy man, a religious and highly respected man; a man of outstanding personality; an honored and distinguished citizen. And he seems to have been the chief and most responsible actor in this drama -- and he was of Israel. Who was Ruth, after all? What was Ruth? She was a widow. Nothing discreditable about that. She was a Moabitess, and there was a good deal discreditable and dishonorable about that. We shall see that she was a stranger, an alien in the land - why should the book go down in history under her name? Well, you see, the answer to that question is, firstly, the message of the book. But more than

that, it is the sum of the whole Bible.

For the whole plan of redemption, in all its principles and in all its glories, is gathered into this little book. You can read it in ten minutes. There is no more comprehensive book in the Bible in relation to the principles of God's way of redemption. This book needs to be rescued from the backseat. I trust that today something of that will be done. I have said that the whole great plan of redemption is found here in principle. And oh, how very much there is here of help for the life of the Lord's people. I confess to you that though I have read it many times and have known it for many years, in some early morning hours, recently, in the far west of America, it brought a new thrill to my own heart as I meditated in this book. I felt the Lord was speaking to me in relation to this conference.

Well, let us come to it, and begin to extract, or take note of, some of the beautiful and wonderful things that it has to say to us.

The book is so simple, isn't it? There's nothing profound here. We're not dealing with mysteries. It's the easiest book of all to read. And so these wonderful things about the Lord, and His people -- you and me -- are brought to us, without any strain or effort, in the very simplest way. We must not stumble, though, at its simplicity. This book unfolds itself and its message along certain quite clearly discernible lines that run right through it.

We note its historic setting. To what place in the history of the Old Testament does it belong? That is stated for us in the very first sentence: "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled." Although it must have been written long after those days, its own internal evidence shows that it was when -- not after -- the judges ruled. This is not a sequel to the book of Judges. This is something that actually took place in the days of the Judges.

Now you need to be refreshed as to the content of the book of Judges. All that we can say at the moment is that the book of Judges is one of the most terrible books in the whole Bible. Indeed, the most shocking things in the Bible are found there. There are those things that you don't like to read; you like to pass over them; you just want to shut your eyes, and take no notice. Yes, a dark, terrible and at times a very evil situation existed, showing capabilities of the people of God which are altogether beyond imagination: the depths of iniquity in the human heart; the remote position from the thoughts of God to which His people can come. It is difficult to speak in exaggerated terms of some things in that book. Indeed, more than once, as we read through the book of Judges we have been amazed at the patience of God; the willingness of God to come back to His people. Well, right in that book, while that condition in general existed, you set this contrast. This beautiful picture is given to us in the book of Ruth.

And so we are brought to see God acting, with the long view, in the midst of such conditions, and at such a time. Look at the last words of the book of Judges: "In those days, there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes." And the last words of the book of Ruth: "... and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David." God, acting, with a long view, in such conditions, and at such a time. Wonderful to contemplate. Everything seems to be a contradiction of God, and indeed it is. Everything seems to say: "This situation is spiritually hopeless. This is spiritual calamity in its last stages." And right in the midst of that, God is acting, with a long view. And He's acting toward that day, bringing in David and the glorious kingdom, and through David another greater than David, and a still more glorious kingdom.

I think that very first thought is a tremendously inspiring one, a tremendously reassuring, comforting and encouraging one. We are sometimes inclined to think that the situation is spiritually very desperate, and

very difficult, and the thoughts of God are far from being expressed and represented amongst His people. Things have gone far from that, and I say, it's reassuring to recollect that in worse days than these God was acting, secretly and sovereignly, with a long view, to have it as He ever intended it to be. It's then that He did it.

Well, if we said no more, that's help, isn't it? And that's the message here, right at the very beginning.

But let us break this up and let us take up these leading lines, above which the message is unfolded.

The first line, of course, is a dark line. It's the line of tragedy. "In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land." And we know, do we not, that again and again in the history of Israel, the word of the Lord was fulfilled in that very way. In faithfulness to Him, He would bless His people, in their field, in their basket, and in their stores. That was fulfilled again and again. Outstandingly, you remember in the days of Elijah: "Thus saith the Lord, 'there shall not be rain upon the earth these seven years'", and the drought and the famine followed, with devastating result. And when you look at the book of Judges, you're not surprised, are you, at this famine? The famine was not just something that happened. It was a part of the divine judgement, because of the spiritual state, because of their lost distinctiveness.

Read in the book of Judges again. Sometimes it seems that even the best people were implicated in this. Gideon! Even in Gideon's own home, the home of his father, there were idols. And later, after the Lord had used Gideon so mightily, he set up an image. The lost distinctiveness of the Lord's people! He was called to stand apart from all other gods. And resultantly, their lost ascendancy over their enemies. A case of constantly reiterated defeat and subjugation to one nation or another. Lost ascendancy, lost unity -- they were a disintegrated people morally and spiritually. They had no authoritative testimony in the world; it was gone. God was not all in the land where He had so signally and wonderfully moved in order that He should be the only God of Israel. We have spoken about this earlier. Dividedness, God was against. And the singleness of God's place, toward which He moved -- firstly in calling Abram out of Ur, from the 5,000 gods that were worshipped there, to be His only God; and then, keeping him waiting till the day when Canaan was assailed; through Joshua, for the destruction of the seven nations because of their gods. Clear that land of idolatry, to bring His people into a land where He alone -- utterly -- was the object of their occupation and worship. Here, there are other idols in the land, and their testimony is gone. He is not all. No wonder there's a famine in the land.

If you like to translate that into spiritual terms, you see, it works that way spiritually now, as it were, literally and historically in the old dispensation. The measure of our food -- our spiritual resources, our plenty, our increase, our enlargement -- is the measure in which we are conformed to the thoughts of God. It's governed in that way. And there's a great deal of spiritual famine about today. Yes, the Lord's people today are very hungry; indeed, they're starving. And everywhere you go you have this complaint: "We can't find bread. It's difficult to find any spiritual food. There's a famine in hearing the Word in any fullness." And you know, Bible teaching is not always feeding. There may be plenty of Bible teaching. Indeed, there may be Bible Institutes galore and the people may still be starving. A large percentage of the Lord's people may attend them and go through their sessions and still be poor, thin, scraggly things in their spiritual life. Don't let us confuse these things for food is food; and there is a dearth of real spiritual food and largely because the full thoughts of God for His people do not obtain, do not govern. It's otherwise where they do. So then, there is famine in the land.

Note: "And a certain man of Bethlehem-judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab; he and his wife and his two sons."

Now Elimelech, his wife and two sons were very decent people, very nice people, were very good people. We haven't anything at all that's said against them, in their moral life, in their respectability. Perhaps in their God-fearingness, in heart. But here's a thing to note: How often good, and honest, and sincere people of God become involved in tragedy because of the general state of the Church. Look at this line of tragedy. Here it is in verse 1. "They went to sojourn in the country of Moab." Vs.2 "The name of the man is Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion. And they came unto the country of Moab, and continued there, and they took their wives of the women of Moab. The name of the one was Orpah, the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Mahlon and Chilion died, both of them. And the woman was left of her two sons, and her husband." Vs.20 and Naomi said -- "Call me not Naomi; call me Mara -- 'bitterness'. I went out full. The Lord hath brought me home again empty. Why call ye me Naomi? Seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me."

It's tragedy, isn't it? Tragedy. And it's the tragedy of good people being involved in a situation on the part of the Lord's people more generally, which is not according to the Lord's mind. Do you know what I mean? You see, this was evidently lost heart. This man Elimelech lost heart, lost hope. He lost faith. He said "It's no use staying here. There's nothing for us here. There's no prospect here, no way here. We'd better get out." This man lost heart and hope and faith, and made a terrible mistake which led to tragedy -- because of the state of the Lord's people. Oh, how many things there are in the lives of so many of the Lord's people which would never be if the Lord's people as a whole were right. You think of all the things which have come in to Christianity, which ought never to have come in, and would never have, if the original position of the day of Pentecost and afterward had been maintained. All the things that came in when spiritual decline came in, and all this terrible heritage of the day when the Church began to lose its spiritual position. And how many have become involved? We've got to take this attitude, dear friends, about people who seem to be in a mess. Why are so many in a mess? It's not their own fault. It's because they haven't got the help they ought to have, by the Church, and amongst the people of God. Because things are not in that condition when they can get their help amongst the people of God.

You see, the state of the Lord's people collectively has a very tragic repercussion upon the individuals of the Lord's people and their lives. When the Lord's people collectively are in a right spiritual state, corresponding to the Lord's mind and thought and revealed will, then the individuals find their safety among the Lord's people, and are saved from a lot of mistakes. They find their life there. They find their guidance there. They find their protection there. They find their wisdom there. That's how it ought to be. But because that state is not so, as the Lord would have it, lots of people are just making terrible mistakes and blunders. They're involved in this whole thing, and it's tragedy for many individuals because they haven't got the values of the corporate and collective life of the Lord's people as He would have it. We must be very considerate and very sympathetic, and very understanding. For the blame is not always upon the individual. They have become involved in a Christianity which has brought in a lot of things that God never intended, and which never would have been if things had continued as at the beginning.

So here are decent, respectable, nice people, God-fearing in their own heart, but moving out along a line of terrible tragedy, because the nation was wrong, because the corporate body was wrong. It was like that.

But then, they're not altogether without blame, because there is individual responsibility. And tragedy just must overtake those who surrender their faith and principle to policy or personal security.

Have you got that? You see, they knew quite well that the covenant related to that land, which was their home. They belonged to the covenant land and the covenant people, and they knew quite well what God had said about other lands and especially about Moab. Whether they'd slipped up, in forgetting their Bibles, I'm not able to say; but, you know, we get into a lot of trouble by not knowing our Bibles. Doing a lot of things that are altogether wrong, whereas the Bible has something to say about that quite precisely and definitely, if only we would know our Bibles, read carefully our Bibles.

You know, David got into a terrible, terrible bit of trouble on one occasion because he forgot his Bible. Over the cart and the ark. Putting the ark on the cart. Oh yes, and the Lord said the Levites should carry the ark, not a cart. It was there, in the Bible. David was very upset with the Lord for smiting the drivers of the cart to death. But he went and had it out with the Lord, and took his Bible and found where it was written that the Levites should carry the Ark. And he adjusted things, but it did not mean that he was saved from the tragedy. Listen to this: The Lord has given us the Word and made known His mind to us. He won't save us from the tragedy. He won't save us from the tragedy that follows our ignorance of what we could know, and should know. That's a very deep lesson that comes out of this case.

So, tragedy must overtake those who surrender faith. Ah, yes! It was a call to faith, wasn't it? You see, the whole of this wonderful story in this little book works out to such a triumphant issue because faith comes in somewhere. Faith came back where it had been lost. We mustn't anticipate, but you see, it came back, right into the family circle of Elimelech.

The lost faith led to the tragedy. The recovered faith led to recovery and glory.

Ah, yes! A very severe test of faith, it's true. A severe test of faith, but you've got a principle here. The Lord Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights and was hungered. The situation perhaps, physically, was quite critical, perhaps desperate. And Satan said, "Come on, let these stones be made bread."

Here's a test of faith in the Father, isn't it? You see the principle? Whether faith in the Father will lead us to do the right thing or loss of faith will lead us to do the wrong thing?

What a tragedy it would have been if the Lord Jesus had surrendered faith in His Father to apparent necessity, to the circumstances which seemed after all so desperate and so serious.

Here it is: Elimelech let go his faith under testing. Surrendered it to circumstances. Surrendered it to policy. And one of the most disastrous things is policy -- what is it politic to do, as over against what God has said? Allowing policy to govern, or our own advantage, our own security, our own well-being, when God has made His mind about it perfectly clear in His Word.

You see, we cannot, after all, preserve our fullness (1:21). "I went out full". We cannot preserve our fullness off of God's ground. We may have a lot, but get off of God's ground and you can't keep it. They thought they would keep it all, you see, by going to Moab. To preserve their fullness, they went out full. Evidently, they took everything with them. They thought they would be quite secure. They'd brought everything with them. Full they went out, she said, and they came back empty.

We can preserve nothing at all if we get off of God's ground, if we get onto ground that is foreign to God. And Moab was altogether foreign to God, and foreign to God's covenant. Indeed, it was worse than that.

And so Naomi said, in these terrible words: "I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home empty."
"The Lord hath testified against me, the Almighty hath afflicted me."

You see, God acted sovereignly, in disapproval. What for? To get them back. Adversity under God's hand is always intended to be firstly, a corrective and then a restorative. God is sovereign, and He acted sovereignly with them. And so He brought this adversity upon them. He could do no other. In His kindness, in His mercy, and according to His beneficent thought, He chastened them.

David said, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray." How true that is here in this case. Ah, yes, it's all the dark line. Here is, what? Well, death. Elimelech is dead. His two sons are dead. Death, deadlock, impasse. No way then! Everything has come to a deadlock, to a standstill. All tied up. Barrenness. Naomi tells that of herself and the two wives of her two sons -- No children! All is barrenness and death when we act contrary to the revealed mind of God.

It is a terrible lesson -- No fruitful ministry if we're off of God's ground. Oh, take it to heart! God has made His mind perfectly clear: on all matters concerning my life and service, He has laid down His principles. He has told us where and on what ground He will meet us; He has told us that it is in His House that He'll meet with His people. He has told us that He has appointed in His House certain things and certain people, under the Holy Spirit's anointing, for our direction, for our safety, and for our good. Let us get off of that ground and see what happens. You can put it to the test. God forbid that you would, but it's apparent, it's quite clear. There's limitation and spiritual death, and barrenness. The lives that are just moving fast on toward their close, with a story of barrenness that might have been a story of fullness, of richness of service, because they would not and will not recognize God's principles amongst His people.

Say what you like about it. Blame the Lord's people; blame the Lord's servants if you will. God's word is perfectly clear on that. We shall find our way, and we shall find our service on the ground that God has laid down. And if we, knowing that, or, having had it given to us in the Word of God, (and we should know it) ignore it, or give ourselves out of it, depart from it, refuse to have it, violate it - alright - spiritual death, spiritual barrenness, spiritual deadlock.

These are things that we should lay to heart, hard as they sound. Let's lay them to heart. The inheritance which ought to be ours, and is ours by right, by covenant, as in this case, either falls into abeyance - we're deriving nothing from it - or it passes to others. There's a terrible warning in the book of the Revelation -- "Let no man take thy crown." That crown that could be ours passing to others.

Well, that's one of the lines upon which this whole story unfolds. It's a tragic line. It's the dark line. And I know you're oppressed by it. Still, it's as well that we recognize the message of this book. Because, dear friends, it's not only a message which applies to us individually in our Christian lives, but you see, this is one of the major lines of the whole doctrine of redemption, which probably we shall see later on.

Until you recognize the ground of death, the reasons for death and deadlock, and barrenness, you're not in a position to appreciate the wonderful, wonderful mercy of God.

So we pass to the next line along which the book unfolds. We could gather that under one little phrase and title of the Lord's well known to us in the New Testament, the God of hope. That's a dark, terrible background, but over that stands this -- The God of Hope.

Ruth 1:6 "Then she arose with her daughter-in-laws, that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread."

Vs.22 "Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law with her, which returned out of the country of Moab, and they came to Bethlehem, in the beginning of the barley harvest."

Good news from a far country! Good news in a far country. She had heard. Out of the land, in the land of Moab God had visited His people. It's difficult to place this in the book of Judges. But it was evidently one of those periods between the tragedies that were there. There were those periods, as you know in the Judges, when the situation was changed. For a little while, under Gideon, for instance, and under Deborah, and under others -- insight patches in a long, dark day of 400 years. It was evidently in one of those brighter periods in that dark history, that this is set. "The Lord visited His people, and gave them bread." -- and they passed from famine to harvest.

There is a place where God meets us, but He will only meet us in that place. And that place is resurrection -- on resurrection ground.

Well, "the Lord is risen indeed!" Says Thomas, "I won't believe it." And so he was not with them when the Lord appeared at first. He was somewhere away, outside, wandering about, perhaps, in his despair and darkness. The Lord never went after Thomas. He let him get on with it, let him stew in his misery. "Here is the place where I'll meet you, where you believe that I am risen." "Be not faithless, but believing." It was a question of faith, wasn't it? To believe in the resurrection.

The good news had gone out. "We have seen the Lord. The Lord is risen", but he wound up not believing the good news; and so he was left outside in the dark -- and the Lord didn't go out to him. It was not until he came in. How it was he came in on that day we don't know. Something had been going on in him. Perhaps he'd come to the place where he said -- "I'm certainly getting nowhere along this line. This is getting me nowhere. If there is any hope at all it seems to be amongst those people, in that room. The least I can do is to go and see." Ah, yes, and when he got on to the ground where the Lord was believed and where they were enjoying the reality of His resurrection, the Lord met him and he met the Lord.

There is always a ground, you know, like that. You know, the story of the prodigal has that aspect to it. The elder brother would not go in. Alright, let him stay outside as miserable as he could be. All the rejoicing is inside. He's got to come on to resurrection ground in order to be in the good of resurrection life and joy. That's the place where the Lord meets us, you see, the barley harvest.

Now you Bible students know quite well that barley is always the type of resurrection. It's the first of the harvests of the grain. Barley is referred to quite a lot in this little book, isn't it? Let's look. Six times in the little book. And from the barley harvest Ruth comes into her new life, her new fullness, by what Boaz gives her of this store of barley. Everything is resting on the barley and the barley harvest.

What about those five barley loaves with which the Lord fed multitudes? What did He go on to say immediately afterwards? "My flesh is life indeed." "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" Well, the mystery of Christ imparting His life to us is only known by our being on resurrection ground, isn't it? The Holy Spirit ministering Christ after His resurrection. His resurrection, His risen Life ministered to us. It's the barley loaf, you see. You can go through the Bible with it and see it; it's always this one thing: resurrection.

1 Peter 1:3,4 "The living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead unto an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, that fadeth not away reserved for you." You can read that right in the book of Ruth.

So God always moves back, as well as forward, along the line of resurrection. That's the message here. He's moving back along the line of resurrection. In other words, God is always on the positive line. This situation is no pleasure to God, no satisfaction to God. This tragedy of things -- either in the land or in the lives of these few -- gives God no glory. He always reacts to a situation like that on the principle and the line of resurrection.

He's on a positive line. Do believe this. Are you somewhere in a tragic situation? Have you come to arrest? A deadlock, an impasse, and barrenness? Do you feel you've got off the Lord's ground? Listen, the Lord doesn't accept that, and He doesn't want you to accept that. The Lord does not believe that is the ultimate thing. The Lord acts on positive lines. There is no despair and tragedy so deep and terrible but that the Lord will react to it in resurrection.

Oh, lay hold of this by faith, lay hold of this, that God is the God of resurrection! God is the God of the barley harvest. His answer to death and desolation? He is the God who raiseth the dead.

If you feel like that, believe Him, as that. Believe Him.

There's good news for you. As for Naomi, Good News. The reversing of all our misfortunes is in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Have you got that? Yes.

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