

Three Women

Ruth 1.

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The incidents recorded in the opening chapter of the Book of Ruth, though taking place in a time long past, and in circumstances very different to those of today, are rich with instruction, warning, and encouragement for believers of every age.

These incidents are connected with three women. First, in the story of Naomi, we see a backsliding saint, and the gracious way the Lord takes to bring about restoration. In the case of Orpah we have the solemn warning of one who makes a fair profession of godliness, but in the end turns back to the world. Lastly, in the story of Ruth we are encouraged by the example of one who, not only makes a fair profession but, to use our Christian language, bears all the marks that accompany salvation.

To enter into the full significance of the stories of these three women, it is necessary to recall the character of the day in which they lived. From the first verse of the chapter we learn that these incidents took place "In the days when the judges ruled." The solemn character of those days is summed up in the closing verse of the previous book.

There we read, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Moses, when instructing the people as to their conduct after they had come into possession of the Land, definitely said, "Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes" (Deut. 12: 8). Three hundred years after this warning we find the people in the Land, but, according to the records of the closing chapters of Judges, in a low moral condition marked by gross corruption and violence. This low condition is traced back to two causes. First, they had cast off the authority of God as their King; secondly, as a result, every man was doing that which was right in his own eyes. They were thus marked by *the casting off of Divine authority*, on the one hand, and *the assertion of human independence*, on the other.

It is very obvious that all the misery and confusion in the world to-day spring from the same causes. The throwing off of Divine authority, and the assertion of self-will, are working havoc in the political world, the social circle, and the family life. Rulers, masters, and parents, give up the fear of God; subjects, servants and children increasingly act in self-willed independency.

The world, however, is not our direct concern. That which should give us the deepest exercise is the solemn fact that the same principles which are bringing the world to ruin, have already brought about the ruin of the Church in responsibility. Moreover, to come closer home, even amongst those who have sought to walk in separation from the corruptions of Christendom, how often the same evils

have led to scattering and division. We have not been true to Christ as the Head of His body — we have failed in holding the Head — with the result we have done that which is right in our own eyes.

The instant we cease to hold the Head — to draw all our needed supply of grace, wisdom, and power, from Christ the ascended Head of the body, the Church — it can be said of us, in the language of the times of the Judges, we have "no King." The inevitable result follows, that we fall back on our own resources and do that which we judge to be right in our own eyes. We may be very sincere, very religious, and very active in good works, but, if we are doing what we judge to be right in our own eyes, we are acting in independency of our Risen Head.

The first result of giving up the direct authority of the Lord, and acting in independency, is to bring about a famine amongst the people of God. Se we read, "*there was a famine in the land.*" The very land that should have been, according to God's promise, a land of plenty, flowing with milk and honey, had become a land of famine. Alas! have we not to admit that again there is a famine amongst the people of God, and for the same reasons. We have failed to give Christ His place as the Head of His body — he One Who is the source of all spiritual supply, whereby he body "maketh increase . . . unto the edifying of itself love."

As ever, a time of famine is a time of testing. It costs us little to be identified with the people of God when outwardly everything is prosperous. But when difficulties arise and conflicts have to be faced, when weakness becomes manifest, then the reality of our faith is put to the test.

Under the pressure of trial some may turn aside from God's path for His people, as in the case of Naomi; the empty profession of others is exposed, as in the case of Orpah, while, with others the very trial becomes an occasion to manifest their devotedness to the Lord, as so blessedly illustrated in the story of Ruth.

1 — NAOMI.

In the days, then, of Naomi such was the low condition of God's people that there was a famine in God's Land. Elimelech, her husband, lacking in the faith that looks to God in trial, turns aside from the Land of Jehovah to seek relief in the land of Moab, taking with him his wife and two sons. In Scripture the different countries that surround Jehovah's Land are used as types of the world in different aspects. Egypt speaks of the gross world in which man seeks to gratify his lusts, Babylon of the world in which man seeks to exalt himself by a corrupt religion. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that "Moab hath been at ease from his youth, and he hath settled on his lees, and hath not been emptied from vessel to vessel" (Jer. 48: 11). Thus Moab represents the world in its ease where one can escape the conflict entailed in fighting the good fight of faith.

To-day, when those who have escaped the gross world of Egypt, and the corrupt religious world of Babylon, are faced with famine and conflict amongst the people of God, the world in the form typified by Moab becomes a sore temptation. Many a saint, since the days of Elimelech, harassed and wearied with strife and conflict, has given up God's ground for His people to seek a life of ease in some quiet circle which tries nobody's conscience and allows of everybody's will.

Thus we read of Elimelech, his wife, Naomi and their two sons, that "they came into the country of Moab," and, what is yet more solemn, we read, they "Continued there." In spite, however, of its promise of ease and quiet and rest, it proved but a place of sorrow and loss for the children of God. Moab, with its green hills and dales, looked very attractive, but Elimelech has to learn that "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 16: 25). Thus it

came to pass that Elimelech, who sought to escape death by famine in the Land of Jehovah, walks into the arms of death in the land of Moab. To take a false step to avoid trouble will oftentimes lead into the very trouble we seek to avoid.

Following upon the death of Elimelech, the two sons marry strange wives of the land of Moab. Ten years pass away, and then death lays its hand upon the two sons. Naomi, bereft of her husband and sons, is left a lonely woman in a strange land. Leaving the Land of God to escape the trials of a famine, she has found in the land of Moab only bitterness and sorrow.

At this point in the story of Naomi we pass from the solemn warnings as to the failure of a saint to the rich instruction in the restoring grace of the Lord. Naomi had wandered from the Land of Jehovah, and come under the chastening of the Lord. If, however, the Lord chastens it is for our blessing, to bring us back to Himself, and the circle of His own people, in His own land. Thus there comes a moment in the history of Naomi when we read "She arose with her daughters-in-law that she might *return from the country of Moab.*" But what led her to return? It was not the sorrows of the land of Moab, but the good news that she heard concerning the Land of Jehovah. It was not the want and misery of the far country that drove the prodigal from that land of sin, it was the realisation of the plenty in the Father's house that drew him home, for he said, "In my Father's house there is bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger, *I will arise and go to my Father.*" So, in the history of Naomi, when she heard "that the LORD had visited His people in giving them bread . . . she went forth out of the place where she was . . . to return unto the land of Judah." Our sin may harden our hearts and drive us still farther from the Lord; but the thought of His grace breaks our hearts and draws us back to Himself. It is

"the thought of Jesu's love

Lifts our poor hearts this weary world above."

Further, we see very blessedly set forth in the story of Naomi that restoration to the Lord is rightly followed by *reception among the Lord's people*. Thus we read, "It came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them." How is it that there is so little restoration today? May it not be that too often the people of God are so little moved about the wanderers? May the Lord give us to taste a little more of the compassion of His heart that led Him to go after a wandering sheep until He found it.

Then, as we listen to the words of Naomi we shall see every mark of a restored soul, and learn some home truths as to the sorrow of backsliding. First, Naomi says, "The Almighty hath *dealt* . . . with me" (v. 20). It would seem that for ten long years she had ceased to have any dealings with the Lord, but the Lord had not ceased to deal with her. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God *dealeth* with you as sons" (Heb. 12: 6, 7).

Secondly, she says, not only that the Lord had dealt with her, but, that He had dealt with her "very *bitterly.*" If the Lord deals with us in our backslidings we shall find that "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but *grievous:* nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

Thirdly, Naomi says, "*I went out*" (v. 21). She exhibits the true mark of a restored soul by taking all the blame for departing from Jehovah's Land. As a matter of fact the story tells us that it was Elimelech who "went out." He took the lead; but Naomi does not attempt to shelter herself by blaming her husband. She does not say the circumstances were so trying, and the pressure was so great that I could not help turning aside. Ah no! she owns as we all must own that the secret cause of all our

wanderings is not in the failure of others, or the pressure of circumstances, but in ourselves.

Fourthly, she owns that the Lord had brought her back. She owns that she went out but it was the Lord that brought back. Left to ourselves, as backsliders, none of us would ever come back if the Lord did not bring us back. So David can say, "*He restoreth my soul.*"

Fifthly, she does not simply say that the Lord brought me back, but "the LORD hath brought me *home* again." When He brings back it is not to some half-way house but right back into the warmth and love of the home circle. When the Shepherd picked up His wandering sheep, He laid it on His shoulders and we read, "*when He cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.*" Blessed be His Name, nothing less than His home will do for His sheep.

Sixthly, nevertheless there is a solemn confession that Naomi has to make. If the Lord brought her home, she has to own that "the Lord hath brought me home again *empty*." "I went out full" she says, and the Lord brought me back, but He brought me back empty. All the days of our wanderings are days in which we make no spiritual growth, though they may, indeed, be days when we are stripped of everything that hinders spiritual progress.

Seventhly, there is one other exceedingly comforting truth, for every restored soul, that shines out in Naomi's history. We read that the time of her return was "*in the beginning of barley harvest.*" If the Lord brings us back empty, He takes care to bring us back to plenty.

Thus, in the story of Naomi there passes before us the sorrows of a backsliding saint; the gracious dealings of the Lord in restoration, and the reception of the restored saint amongst the Lord's people.

2. — ORPAH.

In the brief allusion to Orpah we see the sorrowful case of one who makes a fair profession and yet lacks every vital link with God and His people. It is solemn to see how far nature can go in making a fair profession, even as the Apostle Paul warned us that in these last days there will be many who have "the form of godliness, but deny the power thereof."

We see the form of godliness strikingly set forth in Orpah. First, she *identified* herself with Naomi, a true believer. We read both of Ruth and Orpah that they went "with her," and again, "they went on the way" (v. 7). It looked as if Orpah had made a clean cut with her old life, and had started for Immanuel's Land.

Then the test comes: Orpah has opportunity to return. Naomi says, "Go, return each to her mother's house." This calls forth the fact that Orpah was marked by a great deal of nice natural feeling, for we read, "They lifted up their voice and wept." Indeed, it looked as if Orpah was going to pass the test, for she appears to make a very definite decision to cast in her lot with Naomi and the people of God, for she joins with Ruth in saying, " Surely, we will return with thee unto thy people." Moreover, she is not lacking in natural affection, for we read, "Orpah *kissed* her mother-in-law " (vv. 9 10, 14).

Nevertheless, in spite of her identification with Naomi in spite of her tears, her fair words, and her kisses, she returns to her people, her gods, and her land, and we hear no more of Orpah. Her profession was fair; she had the form of godliness, but she lacked the power of godliness — simple faith in God.

3. — RUTH.

In striking contrast to Orpah we have the touching story of Ruth. Like Orpah she leaves the land of Moab; she identifies herself with Naomi. She, too, is moved to tears, and makes a definite decision. But, in contrast to Orpah, she exhibits all the marks that accompany salvation. We remember that in a solemn passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apostle warns us that we may be "enlightened," and taste of the blessedness of heavenly things, and even partake of the outward privileges of the Christian circle in which the Holy Spirit dwells, and yet apostatise, and thus prove we have no vital link with Christ. But, speaking of those to whom he is writing, he says, "We are persuaded better things of you, and *things which accompany salvation.*" Then he presents three of these things, "Love" "Hope," and "Faith" (Heb. 6: 9-12). Very blessedly we see that Ruth is marked by these three things.

First, in simple and beautiful "*faith*" she turns her back on her native land to travel to Jehovah's Land. She accepts the pilgrim path, for she says, "Whither thou goest, I will go." She takes the place of a stranger with no certain home, for she says, "Where thou lodgest I will lodge." She identifies herself with the people of God as she says, "Thy people shall be my people," and expresses her confidence in God, as she adds, "Thy God" shall be "My God." Moreover she is marked by devoted *love*. Orpah may indeed kiss Naomi, but of Ruth we read, she "clave unto her." Further, she says, "Where thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried." Lastly, she was marked by "*hope*," for we read, "She was stedfastly minded to go." As it were, in the light of another world, she gave up the present world.

To nature it might appear that Ruth was acting with the utmost folly. She gives up her home, her kindred, and her country; and identifies herself with a broken-down old woman, to go to a Land she has never seen and a people of whom she has no personal knowledge. To reason and sight this seems madness, even as to-day it may appear great folly to identify oneself with the poor, and foolish, and weak things of this world, and to leave the great religious world, to share the reproach of Christ outside the camp. But "it doth not yet appear what we shall be." Only faith that looks on to the glorious end can take such a path. The start that Ruth made in company with an aged, lonely, and desolate woman was only the beginning of the story: in the end she will appear as the Bride of the mighty Boaz: and yet more wonderful her name shall be for ever enshrined in the genealogy of our Lord. In the light of her after history, who will say that she made a mistake when she threw in her lot with the aged Naomi? Orpah, who chose the world and its ease, passes into oblivion; Ruth who turned her back on the world passes on to honour and glory.

In our day let us remember that the path of suffering, reproach and shame that, in different measures, will be the lot of those who follow a rejected Christ may look very foolish in the eyes of the world; but faith knows that it will end in the great day of the marriage of the Lamb. So that we may say in the words of the saintly Rutherford. "There is a long chain of God's ways, counsels, decrees, actions, events, judgments, mercies; and there is white and black, good and evil, crooked and straight, interwoven in this web; and the links of the chain, partly gold, partly brass, iron, and clay, and the threads of this dispensation, go along the patriarchs' days . . . through the generations of the prophets, . . . the apostles, persecuting emperors, and martyrdoms of the witnesses of Jesus, slain by the woman drunken with the blood of saints, till the end of the thread and last link of the chain be tied to the very day of THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB."

Oh day of wondrous promise!

The Bridegroom and the bride

Are seen in glory ever:

And love is satisfied.