

Altavista Presbyterian Church
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“Bound and Determined”
Hebrews 8:1-7
Ruth 1:15-18

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Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hebrews 8:1-7

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

Ruth 1:15-18

Naomi said to Ruth, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

"Bound and Determined"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Over this past year, the Women's Fellowship has endeavored to follow a series on women of the Bible. There are many powerful, thought-provoking, and inspiring women in Scripture. Many of them took great risks for the Kingdom of God. I can think of Shiphrah and Puah, midwives refusing to murder innocent babes; Rahab, sheltering the Israelite spies in Jericho; Esther, preventing the genocide of her people in exile; Mary, bearing the Son of God. These and many other women offer inspiring stories of strength, hope, and determination that *all* people can appreciate and emulate. One such woman is Ruth.

Let me give you a little background to Ruth. We learn early on that she is a Moabite. If you recall reading in Genesis, the Moabites were descendants of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter. They inhabited the area to the south and east of the Dead Sea and worshiped the false god Baal. Baal worship was probably the biggest contender with Israel, and throughout the Old Testament you'll find stories of Israelites joining with Moabites and God considering that a betrayal. So it might be very surprising to see an entire book of the Bible dedicated to a Moabite. One eternal truth revealed through Ruth is that God's consideration of a person has nothing to do with her ethnicity, rather it has everything to do with faith.

Even so, the inclusion of the book of Ruth is an interesting one, especially when we consider it in the grand timeline of redemptive history. If you zoom out, so to speak, and look at the Book of Ruth in context, you'll see that it falls after the Book of Judges and before the Book of I Samuel.

These two books chronicle different yet important periods of Israel's history. A frequent refrain in Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes," pretty much sums up the ethical quagmire of the era. The people of God were lost, they had a physical homeland, but they remained adrift from God. What the Book of Judges teaches is that Israel needed a king to guide them. The Book of I Samuel chronicles the establishment of the monarchy and the eventual rise of David. Now, David is the reason why the book of Ruth is included in the Bible. Ruth, the Moabite, is David's great-grandmother. How scandalous for Israel's greatest king to be a descendent of Moab! So, the book of Ruth is here to show us how and why God takes no partiality when it comes to ethnicity or national background.

When we approach the story of Ruth with this consideration of its theology and message, we find the very paradigm of redemption, which is accomplished in the plot's ultimate focus, Jesus Christ, the Son of David. That's the big picture lesson. For today, I want us to focus in on this conversation between Naomi and Ruth. Now, I want to make sure we are clear with what's going on in the narrative. Naomi is an Israelite. She came to Moab with her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, as refugees fleeing a famine in Judah. Elimelech dies. So Mahlon and Chilion take for themselves Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. Ten years later, Mahlon and Chilion both die, leaving behind three widows. Back in those days, to be a widow was to be completely disconnected. In Old Testament society, a man was necessary for a family unit to work.

Aware of this, Naomi makes plans to return to her kin, to her closest male relative, back in Judah. Her daughters-in-law are Moabites, they don't belong in Judah, they don't have any kin there who could take care of them. So she tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their families. This makes sense for Naomi. And it apparently makes sense for Orpah, because she takes Naomi up on this offer and returns to her family. Ruth, on the other hand, is bound and determined to stay with her mother-in-law. For some reason, she wants to take her marriage covenant seriously. Naomi has offered to break that covenant, perfectly legal, yet Ruth doesn't want to.

The King James Version is a beautiful translation of Ruth's promise, "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me." These words are often read at weddings. Why is that? These words are spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law, not husband and wife. Why do couples choose to use these words in their nuptials? Well, Scripture also teaches us "a man shall leave his father and his mother and *hold fast* to his wife, and they *shall become one flesh*."¹ Marriage is a covenantal relationship. Ruth's words are a covenant promise. Therefore, these words are perfect for a wedding.

How often do you think we make covenants with people? You might say not very often. A covenant seems like such an intense and binding ordeal. They are more like once in a lifetime events. That may be true, but how often do we make promises to people? "I promise to get back to you. I promise I won't forget. I promise to pick up milk. I promise to behave myself." When we think about it, we make promises fairly regularly. Now, how often do we hold ourselves to these "little" promises? It's easy to forget the promise you made in the morning after a full day of work and busyness. I'm not casting a judgment on that, because I know I'm guilty, too. But what about our big covenants, those once in a lifetime promises? Marriage covenants, baptismal covenants,

even ordination covenants. Most of us here have been or are married. Nearly all of us have been baptized—if you haven't, let me know. I know a lot of you have been ordained as elders of this church. How many of us are serious about these covenants? How many of us are as serious as Ruth?

I'm thinking specifically about our baptismal and ordination covenants. With marriage covenants we have this [point to ring] to remind us. Those who are baptized have your name written down somewhere on a roll or a certificate, but we don't have a token that reminds us of our baptism. The same with ordained eldership. It is our responsibility then, to remember our covenant with God. Ruth took very seriously her covenanted relationship with Naomi, to the point of forsaking her former self, her ethnic identity, and her religion. In our regeneration through the Spirit and our baptism in Christ, we take on a similar covenant.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that those who are in covenant relationship with Christ are dead to sin and buried to the old way of doing things. Baptism symbolizes the old self crucified with Christ. Sin's dominion over us has been brought to nothing; our enslavement to sin brought to liberation. If we have died with Christ, we also believe that we will live with him. Since he was raised from the dead and will never die again, death no longer has dominion over him nor over those adopted through him. Therefore, we must consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. If we take this consideration seriously, then we should zealously and quickly respond as Ruth did.

“Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.” We make this same promise to Christ when we are born again through the Spirit. This promise means we do not allow sin to reign in our lives. We are not free from sinning, for we all do and will continue to sin. What Paul is saying is that we no longer allow sin to govern our bodies and our minds. Before Christ, we easily submit to sin and joyfully let it run rampant. In Christ, we strive to reject sin's hold on us by finding our joy, peace, and hope in the Lord. The old life, the old way of doing things, we must shed those off. Just like Ruth shed her former ways, shedding off her Moabite identity to take on the identity of Child of God, so too do we shed our former selves.

The sins we find so much pleasure in doing are cast aside, because we have a higher pleasure in obedience to God. The sins we enjoy to revel in are rent asunder, because we have a purer rejoicing in worship of God. The sins we lust after are turned down, because we have true happiness in desiring God. We realize all of this when we take seriously our covenantal relationship with God. He wants to have an intimate connection with us; it is our duty to steer clear from that which pollutes and distorts. We need to make room in our hearts for God; and as he says at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, he is a jealous God, and we should have no other gods before him. Fidelity to God should be our highest priority. If that is the case, then all else will fall into place. If we are in a right relationship with God, then a right relationship with our neighbors naturally follows. If we live in covenant with God, then a covenantal community—also known as the church—naturally forms. My dear friends, the ball is in your court. Are you like Orpah and comfortable with returning to the “what was” of sins past, or are you like Ruth and willing to see your baptism through to the “what is” of living in Christ our Lord?

Let us pray. Holy God, your Spirit was in Ruth, turning her and guiding her to you, so that she may bear witness to your covenantal love. Through her you brought about Israel's great King David, and our ultimate king, the Son of David and our Lord Jesus. She could've turned back, back to her familiar ways. Instead, she endeavored to follow you. Engender in us that same determination in our hearts this day. May we fearlessly turn to follow you and imitate Christ in our daily living. In his holy and precious name, we pray. Amen.

¹ Genesis 2:24