

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

January 1, 2012 Be Strong As You Face the Future

No. 3600 Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear radio friends,

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he beginning of a new year is a time for us to reflect on the changes that the passing of time brings into our lives, and also a time to think of the unknown future. When we do this, as believers, we see how weak a creature man is, how weak we are to cope with the changes and uncertainties of life. Maybe as you look back over the last year, you see many things that happened in your life that were simply unexpected and beyond your control. Maybe as you look to the uncertain future, you have many fears and wonder to yourself, “What will come?” and “Will I have the resources to deal with it?”

Today we are going to look at some verses in Joshua 1:5-9, which were spoken by God to Joshua at a time of change and uncertainty in his life. Joshua has just been appointed as the new leader of Israel. Recently he lost his friend and mentor, Moses. He looks at the nation of Israel, which he has to lead, and he sees a people who are unpredictable, who are so easily tempted by the nations around them, quick to complain about their situation, and often rebellious not only against their leaders but also against God.

He looks at the task before him not only as a leader of these people but also as an army captain who must cross over the Jordan River into the land of Canaan and conquer it. There are walled cities, and there are armies with much more strength than his own. This is a period of testing for Joshua and for Israel. Will they have the courage of faith to go forward and to look beyond the strength of these nations and the size of their task, to God who has promised that He will be with them and that He will fight for them?

As we questioning look to the future, our task is much the same. Every Christian is involved in a spiritual battle with enemies much stronger than himself. The enemies are: sin, Satan, the world, and our own evil desires. Ephesians 6:12 says, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” This spiritual battle can be a real cause of concern to the believer. “Will I be able to stand against temptation? I’ve succumbed in the past, and sin has had its way with me. How can I face this enemy again?”

To Joshua and to us God comes in Joshua 1 and He says: “Be strong.” Three times in these verses God repeats this. In verse 6: “Be strong and of a good courage”; in verse 7: “Only be thou strong and very courageous”; and in verse 9: “Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed.”

To be strong is to stand up in the face of opposition. A strong wall can withstand wind and waves. To be of good courage or to be courageous is to remain strong when you are

battered. To not be dismayed is to not be shattered, to not panic.

God commands Joshua to be strong. That tells us something about God's compassion. God says this to Joshua here, not because Joshua is a coward, but to encourage him in what is before him. God understands our weakness and our fears. As Psalm 103 puts it: "He knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." And so God, knowing our weakness, comes and encourages us to be strong.

It reminds me of when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and faced the cross. He prayed earnestly to God, and in compassion God sent angels to minister to Him and to encourage Him. So here, at the beginning of his work, Joshua is encouraged.

But at the same time, though God is sympathetic and compassionate, He still comes with a command to Joshua: "Be strong." And the fact that it is a command means that it is sinful to be weak, to panic, and to collapse under pressure as a believer. God repeats this command to Joshua three times, so that it rings in his ears, so that later he will remember it. We have to think of Joshua standing on the battlefield, leading Israel against resistance forces, being attacked. And God's word is, "Then, Joshua, be strong."

That is also His word for us as we face this world, as we look ahead to 2012 and our responsibilities and the opposition and the temptations. God's word is: "Be strong."

Now understand that this command to be strong actually creates the strength in God's people. That is the power of the

word of God. This is not just a recommendation. It is not like a mother leaving her child on the first day of school and the child does not want to stay and cries and so the mother says, "Now, be a big girl." No, God's word is powerful and life-giving. That is why in verse 9 God says, "Have not I commanded thee?" He is not saying, "Remember what I've commanded you," but rather, "remember who it is that commanded you to be strong." Joshua must remember that God gives him this strength, that God, by His Word, creates this strength in him. God's Word is powerful. When God speaks, things happen. In Ezekiel 24:14 we read: "I the Lord have spoken it: it shall come to pass, and I will do it." By His Word, God created everything. By His Word He still upholds all things. By His Word God saves sinners. It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes (Rom. 1:16). By this Word, God opens our blind eyes and He strengthens our weak hearts. That is why we need to read and hear the Word of God as Christians. If you are not hearing and reading the Word of God, you will become very weak spiritually. You will not be able to stand up against sin in this world. The secret to the believer's strength is in the Word of God.

That comes out in verses 7 and 8, where God speaks of the law of Moses. By the law of Moses, God means not simply the law of the Ten Commandments, but the Torah, that is, the first five books of the Bible that were recently completed by Moses and now were in Joshua's possession. Probably Joshua had the original and only copy of the inspired writings of Moses. And here, in verses 7 and 8, God tells Joshua that there are three things he must do with this law.

First, he must meditate on it day and night. He is to keep the Word of God in his mind continually so that he can

understand it, so that he is ready to use it in whatever situation he faces. Joshua is going to be busy as a leader, but that is not an excuse for him to be negligent in his personal devotions. He needs to be in the Word of God himself as a spiritual leader of God's people. There is not a situation that he will face that he will be able to handle all by himself, without the Word of God.

Second, God says to Joshua that this book of the law should not depart from his mouth. That is, it must not just be on his mind, but also in his words. This is very interesting because the task of teaching Israel did not actually belong to Joshua in his position as leader. Joshua was a military leader and a judge. It was the work of the priests to teach the people. But the point is this. As Joshua gives commands, as Joshua makes decisions, as he responds to situations, as he leads the people, he must see that this is a spiritual task, and he must let God's Word speak through him.

And, third, God tells Joshua to obey the laws of Moses. He says in verse 7: "Observe to do according to all the law, . . . turn not from it to the right hand or to the left." Now, God is saying, "Don't be a hypocrite." Not only must we know the Word of God and be ready to speak of it to others, but also we must obey it, we must live it. If we do not obey it, our knowledge is nothing but proud intellectualism. This command receives the emphasis here in these verses. It is first. And it is repeated both in verse 7 and in verse 8. Obedience is important. There needs to be an exactness about Joshua's obedience. "Turn not to the right hand or to the left." And disobedience is never acceptable. "Observe to do all that is written."

Now I ask you: "How important is the Word of God in your life as a Christian?" Today we have more than just the books of Moses. We have the entire Scriptures. So the command to us includes all of the Word of God. Do you meditate on God's Word day and night, so that you are thinking about God's Word more than anything else in your life? Do you read God's Word regularly, so that it fills your mind? Is it the lamp to your feet and the light on your path directing your living each day? Do you have God's Word written on your heart, so that you are ready, when temptation comes, to take up the sword of the Word and to fight off the tempter, the Devil? And is the Word of God in your mouth, so that in the workplace or in the home with your children or in your interactions socially or if you are out on errands, is it evident to others from what you say that you are one who lives with the Word of God in your heart? Do you speak of God without hesitation, as the God who is the creator and the sovereign over everything? Do you speak with kindness and love that shows that you know the grace of God for you? When you speak of the future and of your goals, is it evident that you have a hope and a purpose outside of this world—that heaven is your home?

And then, do you obey the Word of God? Are God's commandments a joy and a delight for you to live? Do you worship God alone? Do you speak respectfully of the name of God? Do you remember the Lord's Day to keep it holy? Do you honor authority? Do you respect your neighbor's life, his marriage, your marriage, your neighbor's name, your neighbor's possessions? Are these important to you? Is it important to you to obey God's Word?

This is what the child of God does with God's Word. Today, the Bible has fallen on bad times. The inspiration of Scripture is denied. The authority of Scripture is questioned. The Scriptures are no longer viewed as infallible, inerrant, the Word of God. People are believing whatever they want and living however they please and they still call themselves Christians. And church leaders today are telling them that this is all right, that God's Word in the Bible is not relevant anymore. And so, they say, we do not need to meditate on it. We do not need to speak of it. We do not need to obey it. And the result is that the church today is very weak.

God is saying to Joshua and to you and to me that the secret to strength for the believer is his use of and his relationship to the Word of God. If you would be strong in the year 2012, then you must meditate on the Word of God day and night. You must let your conversation be filled with the Word of God. And you must obey God's Word. Without God's Word you will become very weak. You will not be able to stand. You will not be able to handle the trials that come your way. You will not have the strength to stand up against temptation. God's Word explains to us everything in our life. God is the sovereign over all these things. And God's Word gives us the strength, by His Spirit, to resist every temptation.

We need the Word of God. Oh that Christians would go back to reading and studying and knowing God's Word in the Bible. Oh that churches would return to biblical preaching and teaching. There is so much paraphernalia in our lives that distracts from and has replaced the Word of God. There is so much garbage in churches today that has taken the place of the pure preaching of God's Word. And the result is that the church is not able to stand against the world anymore and

instead is being swept along with the tides of immorality and pleasure-madness that this world offers.

Now, what is it in God's Word that gives strength to His people? The answer is, the promises of God. We stand on the promises of God.

In Joshua 1 God gives many promises. He says in verse 2: "I will give you the land." He says in verse 3: "Everywhere your foot falls will be yours." In verse 4 He tells them the specific geographical borders of the land that they will possess. In verse 5 He tells them that no one will be able to stand before them. They will cross the Jordan and they will go on conquering till the whole land is theirs. These promises give great courage to Joshua and the people of Israel. As they look at things from their personal perspective, there are many reasons for fear and uncertainty. They are ill-prepared for warfare. There will be no path for retreat once they cross the Jordan River. They will go from a wilderness of wandering to a jungle of enemies. They have nothing to trust in themselves. The only basis they have for confidence is the promises of the Word of God. Only because God has said these things can they be confident as they go forward.

That is important for us as we look ahead. The answer to the future is never yourself. Am I going to be able to do it? Do I have the resources to take on what is before me? No. But God has made promises. I stand on the promises of the Word of God.

There is one promise here in Joshua 1 that stands out above all the others at the end of verse 9: "The Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." That was so important for

Joshua. He had seen in Moses what it meant that God was with him. Moses had been strong for forty years, when the whole nation was weak. And now God says, "I'll be with you, Joshua. Don't be afraid of the future. Don't tremble and fear before your great task. Don't think of the strength of your enemies. I will be with you."

That is a beautiful promise. And you find it over and over in the Scriptures, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. It comes to Jacob at Bethel. It comes to Moses at the burning bush. It comes to David standing before Goliath. It comes to Solomon as he becomes king with a great task ahead of him. It comes to Hezekiah as the city of Jerusalem is surrounded by the Assyrians. In the New Testament you read this promise in Hebrews 13:6, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee"; in Romans 8, in this powerful question: "If God be for us, who can be against us." And, of course, this promise is one of the names of our Savior: Immanuel, which means God is with us. And so Jesus, as He leaves His disciples on the Mount of Olives, says, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

That is God's promise to His people: I am with you. I'll never leave you. By His Word and by His Spirit and in the strength of the communion of the saints, trusting in the promises of God, we go forward.

Maybe your task is like Joshua's—facing great spiritual enemies. Maybe you are pursued by those who hate God and you as Jacob was. Maybe you have a giant sin in your way—a Goliath. Maybe your task as a spiritual leader is to build your home and to build in the church of God as Solomon had to build the temple. Maybe you are surrounded by the enemy and

shut in on every side as Hezekiah was. This is God's promise: "I will be with you." And that is not only a promise, it is also our hope. This is the essence of heaven to come: covenant life with God. In Revelation 21 God says, "I will be with them and be their God and they shall be my people." We stand on the promises of God. We labor, we work, because of the promises of God. And we hope, in the promise of God, to be with Him.

Trusting this promise, we can be strong. May God's Word and His promises be your strength in the year 2012.

Let us pray.

Lord, be with us in what lies ahead. And help us to see our own weakness, so that we place all our trust in Thee. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

January 8, 2012 God Chastens an Unfaithful Family

No. 3601

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

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oday we begin a series of messages on the beautiful little book of Ruth in the Old Testament. I call it a beautiful book not simply because of its main character, Ruth, who is a wonderful example of faith and commitment, but it is a beautiful book primarily because it is a book of God's faithfulness to His covenant. It shows us God's faithfulness to His promises and to His people.

In Psalm 119:75 David writes: "I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me." And that captures what this little book, Ruth, is about. God afflicts His people, but He does it in faithfulness, remembering His promises and His love.

The main promise of the Old Testament is the promise of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. And in this history, God remembers that promise. He uses the sinful choice of Elimelech and Naomi to bring Ruth to faith. Ruth becomes one of the mothers in Israel from whom Christ is born. That is an amazing testimony of the grace and faithfulness of God.

We are going to begin today by looking at the first six verses of chapter 1. Beginning in verse 1 we read: "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land." These words are not simply a time-marker so that we know when this happened. They put this little book in the context of the book of Judges, a period of apostasy when, according to the last verse of the book of Judges, "there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." During this period there is a continual cycle, or downward spiral, of apostasy. The nation of Israel forsakes God's way. He afflicts them. They repent. He sends a new judge to deliver them. They serve Him for a little while, but the next generation again departs from His ways. Into that cycle comes the family of Elimelech and Naomi. The book of Judges concerns a nation. The book of Ruth deals with a family. And we see really the same things played out in this family's life as in the nation.

This family is from the tribe of Judah and lives in the town of Bethlehem. They have two young sons: Mahlon and Chilion. And while the boys are young, God sends a famine on Israel because she as a nation has forsaken Him. Elimelech and Naomi were believers. They came from one of the families that lived in hope of the promise of God. The name Elimelech means "My God is king." And Naomi, his wife's name, means "pleasant one." These were wealthy people, landowners in Bethlehem-Judah. But under the famine, their land was not producing any food. The famine was so bad that they named their children Mahlon, which means "a weakling," and Chilion, which means "one who pines."

So, what does one do when there is a famine? Well, one looks for food. But there was no food in Judah. So Elimelech

and his wife Naomi decided to move to the land of Moab, where there was food. At first they intended only to stay there a little while. Verse 1 uses the word “sojourn,” which means it was intended to be temporary. But once they are there, they decide to stay longer. Verse 2 says they “continued there.”

At first reading, this might sound like a wise decision for a family man. But actually it was far from wise. It was foolish and sinful and unbelieving. And, by the way He deals with this family, God shows that this is the way He evaluates it too. Far from obeying God, Elimelech, like the rest of unbelieving Israel, is doing here what is right in his own eyes.

Why was it so sinful and unbelieving? Well, first, Elimelech and Naomi failed to trust the promises of God. God’s promises belonged with Israel in the land of Canaan. This land was a picture of heaven that was to come. And God had given to each of the families a piece of land in Canaan as a picture of their place in heaven. Besides that, the promise of Christ, who would come as Savior, was tied to the people of Israel. For Elimelech and Naomi, that was very real, very close, because they belonged to the tribe of Judah. God had promised that the Law-giver would come from Judah. And then also, by leaving, they forsook the people of God and isolated themselves as believers. By going to Moab, they said, “the promised land and our place in it are not important to us. The promised Messiah to come from Judah is not worth waiting for. And being with fellow believers is not important to us.”

Second, by leaving for Moab, they refused to take responsibility for their part in the sin of Israel. Israel was experiencing famine from God because of her sin. In leaving,

Elimelech was saying, “Well, that’s not my responsibility.” He had an independent spirit, with little care for the other members of God’s church. Instead of gathering others around him who were also concerned, and speaking to the rulers and saying, “God is judging us for our sins and we need to repent,” he forsook the hard road of corporate responsibility and care for others, being concerned only about himself and his family.

In the third place, this was sin because Elimelech and Naomi put their material well-being above their spiritual needs. They moved to Moab for...food. And in doing that, they cut themselves off from the supply of spiritual food that belonged to God’s people in Canaan. In Moab there would be no daily sacrifices as types of the promised Christ, no priests to explain the Word of God, no public worship with other believers, no means of grace. And God had said in Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.” Man needs spiritual food. But under trial of famine, Elimelech set the Word of God aside for bread and water.

That points to the fourth thing here that shows their sin, namely this, that they did not trust God to provide their earthly needs. The promise of God to His people is always this: If you obey and seek Me first, I will meet your earthly needs.” In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” And by “these things,” He means clothing and shelter and food. God promises us that as we seek Him and obey Him, He will provide. Elimelech and Naomi did not trust God.

And, fifth, this was especially sinful because in doing this these parents sinned terribly against their children. They were not faithful as parents. Not only did they give their children a bad example of priorities, but also they exposed their young boys to spiritual danger in the land of Moab. They separate them from God's promises and people and they bring them into contact with a people and a nation who serve other gods and who despise the Lord.

Now in Moab, whom were their children to fellowship with, who would be their friends, whom would they marry? And who was there for Elimelech and Naomi to lean on for spiritual strength? The result was that their two sons end up marrying heathen girls. And even though later Ruth is converted, that in no way justifies their marriage to these women.

Yes, God can work marvels by His grace. But what a dangerous situation, spiritually, for these two young men. Apart from God's gracious intervention, they and their children would grow up in a foreign land, away from God's people and promises, swept along with idolatry.

This was the serious sin of Elimelech and Naomi.

And let us remember that these things are written for us. I Corinthians 10:11 says: "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come." How often do not some Christians fall into the same sin today, exposing their children to the world, allowing their children to marry unbelievers, leaving a true church of Christ for a job offer or a better education in a place where there is no faithful church, or

even leaving the church over petty and personal grievances? This is the same sin.

And remember, Elimelech and Naomi were believers. They did not make these decisions lightly. Elimelech loved his wife and family and he cared about them. That is why he moved to Moab. Perhaps we could say he loved them too much. He loved them more than his love for God. Probably they sat up at night, after their two boys were sleeping, and they worried that they did not have enough food. They wondered what they should do. Then they could look around at the wickedness in Israel and maybe even reason it all over in their minds saying, "How can living with the Moabites be any worse than living here in wicked Israel?" And so they made a terrible judgment. But understand, it was done with a kind of sincerity.

I think many Christians will do the same thing today. There are tough financial decisions to make, job decisions, education decisions, decisions that have to do with the security of our future and the physical well-being of our children. And a decision is made without a thought for the spiritual well-being of the family. People say, "Well, we'll find a church when we get there. God has His people in every place. God will be with us." And they leave the church of God and expose their children to danger.

That is one important area of application here. We have to put a priority on spiritual things.

But let us understand that there is application here for all of us. It is not just about a decision that someone else has made so that you can judge Elimelech, or whoever you are thinking

of that has done something like this. No, the real issue is: Do you have a heart for the church? Do you give a priority in your life to spiritual things? Those are the real questions here. A decision that takes someone away from the church does not come suddenly. It starts in smaller things, like bad attitudes toward the officebearers or the local church, like a lack of involvement in the daily life of the congregation and other members, or like a spirit of individualism or a spirit of superiority. All these things will lead you to thinking, “I don’t really need the church. I don’t really need the other people in the body of Christ.”

Or, it can even be your attitude toward the world. Your main friendships, your social life, is structured outside the church. You have a great interest in the recreation and entertainment of the world, but little interest in spiritual matters. You pour yourself into your work or your pleasure, but spiritual things take a back seat.

All those attitudes will lead you to the same position as Elimelech and Naomi. We need to renew our commitment to spiritual things and to the church today, or we will ruin our covenant homes. There will be consequences in our life.

Look here. There were consequences for Elimelech and Naomi, in verses 3-5. First Elimelech dies. Then the two sons marry heathen women. Then, for ten years, God gives no children to these marriages. And then Naomi loses both her sons and she is left with two Moabite daughters-in-law who have their own connections in life in Moab. In effect, the family line becomes extinct and Naomi becomes empty. And all of this, understand, comes from God and is the direct result of Elimelech’s choice to move his family to Moab.

Perhaps you think that is overstating it and you say, “Well, surely God doesn’t work that way today, does He?” Then I want you to notice a couple other things from the passage.

First, this was, in fact, God’s doing. God judges Elimelech and Naomi very severely. He does that even though they are His people. In verse 13 Naomi says, “the hand of the Lord is gone out against me.” In verses 20 and 21, “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty.” God does this. That is what Naomi is saying. God took her husband and two sons from her. God dealt very bitterly with her. God had afflicted her.

That is true of whatever evil comes upon us. God has a hand in it. He is the sovereign over all things, also over the evils that come into our lives.

Then notice, second, God does this as a direct result of their sin. Had they not gone to Moab, they would never have ended up in this situation. We, of course, know the whole story of Ruth, including its happy ending. But in chapter 1:5 we are not there yet. This is a terrible situation. And it is all because of their choice to go to Moab. What God brings on them is suited to their sin. Elimelech and Naomi turned away from the promises of God and they turned away from the inheritance that God had given them and they turned away from the promised land and the people of God, and God takes their inheritance and their name and their fellowship with one another away.

You realize that God still works that way today. The sins that we commit have consequences that correlate to the sins themselves. That is not to say that every trial that we go

through is the direct result of a sin that we have committed. But, understand, that just as a father will discipline his children in response to particular sins in order to show them that those sins cause misery, and to lead them to repentance and sorrow, so God also will deal with His children. That is what He did here with Naomi.

And then, third, this judgment from God on the family of Elimelech was His loving chastening. God inflicted this pain on Naomi in order to preserve her in her faith and to bring her back to the land of promise—to Canaan. This was chastening, not punishment. This came out of the love and faithfulness of God, not out of spite or revenge. Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth (Heb. 12:6). In Psalm 119:67 the psalmist confesses: “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.” That is a beautiful confession! The psalmist is saying that his God-sent affliction brought him back to the way of obedience. And he is thankful to God for that.

That is the kind of repentance that we see here in Naomi, too. In verse 6 you read that she arose, “that she might return from the country of Moab.” She goes back to Canaan. Why does she go back? Is it simply because now she can get food again in Bethlehem? Is it because she wants to be back with relatives and familiar people? No, this is a sincere repentance. It is her humble response to the way that God has dealt with her. Naomi sees Jehovah’s hand in everything that has come upon her. In verse 6 she heard that the Lord, that is Jehovah, “had visited his people in giving them bread.” In verse 13, “the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” In verse 20, “the Almighty [that is, the sovereign God] hath dealt very bitterly with me.” She is not bitter against God. But she confesses His

faithfulness as Jehovah, the covenant God, and His sovereignty as the Almighty. Her bitterness here is over her own sin. It is the bitterness of repentance, like the repentance of Peter, who went out and wept bitterly.

That is the kind of bitterness that should characterize the Christian. That is a godly sorrow of repentance that leads to life. It is sincere. It shows itself as sincere here in the life of Naomi, in her obedient return to Bethlehem.

That kind of repentance comes entirely as a result of the grace of God worked in our lives. When one of God’s people wanders, He brings them back. He never lets go of His people. There are wonderful illustrations of this in the parable of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. After the shepherd has gone over mountain and hill, through valleys and rivers to find the lost sheep, he comes back rejoicing. And Jesus says in Luke 15:7: “Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.” As the shepherd pursues the sheep to bring it home, so our heavenly Shepherd will pursue one of His sheep that wanders in sin to bring it home again. He will not let one of them perish. That is what Jesus says.

That is the beauty of Naomi’s return. It is a testament to the sovereign, undeserved grace of God for unworthy sinners. That is the message of the whole book of Ruth. God is faithful to His promise concerning Christ. That is what He has in mind in bringing Naomi, and Ruth with her, back to Canaan. This was the line of Jesus Christ. It was as much as dead, extinct. But out of it God brings the Messiah. The Messiah’s coming is not man’s work, but completely a work of God’s grace.

Well, let me close by asking you a question. Where is Moab today? Or, what is Moab today to you? Because Moab is not a place anymore. What is it? Moab today is the place that seems to have the solution to all your problems. The land of Moab is whenever we go away from the Word of God, or the church of God, and think that life will be better when we put our earthly needs and happiness before spiritual things. Moab can be very attractive. It can seem to have all the answers for us. But, be assured, God will not bless you in Moab.

Next week we will continue in the book of Ruth, and I hope that you can tune in.

Let us pray.

Lord, Thy faithfulness and love are greater than all our sins. For this we are thankful. Give us the wisdom to be obedient, to put spiritual concerns above our earthly needs. And help us, too, to be responsible with a view to the future of our covenant families. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

January 15, 2012

The Conversion of Ruth

No. 3602

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

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oday we return to our series in the beautiful little Old Testament book of Ruth. Last week we looked at the first six verses in chapter 1. Today we will look at verses 7-18, under the theme “The Conversion of Ruth.”

Last time we followed the family of Elimelech and Naomi to Moab, where they attempted to escape the judgment of famine that God had brought on Israel. But escaping God is not so easy. God pursued them with a heavy hand of chastening. First Elimelech dies, then the two sons of Naomi (Mahlon and Chilion) marry heathen women. For ten years their wives are barren. Then God takes these two men, and the widow Naomi is left childless. From our human point of view, this is very tragic and sad. It was sad that they should depart from the promised land, and sad that these calamities should come on Naomi.

But God is at work. He uses the trials that Naomi experiences to bring her to a sense of her sin and to bring her back in repentance to the promised land of Canaan—to bring

her back to the means of grace there and to the company of God’s people. In afflicting Naomi, God is faithful to her.

And just as God is working this way in the life of this family, so He is working in this history with His people—the nation of Israel. They are unfaithful. But God, though He chastens them with a famine, never forgets His promise to send the Messiah and Redeemer. If we turn to the last verses of the book of Ruth, we see that this is what God is doing with her. “Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David,” and we could continue: David begat Jesus. You see, though His people are unfaithful, God is remembering His promises.

Last week we left Naomi, in verse 6, returning to Bethlehem because she realized that she needs to be back with God’s people in the promised land of Canaan. As she leaves, her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, follow her. They obviously feel a pity for her. She and they have suffered the loss of the ones that they love. There is an affinity in their suffering. So they go with her. And after they have traveled a ways, probably to the border of Moab, Naomi says to them in verse 8: “Go, return each to her mother’s house.” And she explains that she wants them to do this so that they can move on from the past and each find rest in the house of a new husband.

These two girls show again their concern for Naomi and they respond by saying, “Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.” In reply, in verses 11-13, Naomi urges them: “No, go back. I can’t give you another son to be your husband. And even if I could, would you wait that long? No,” she says. “Go back to your people in Moab.” She is saying,

“If you come with me, your plight will be as mine. You will be widows, and worse, foreigners who are widows in the land of Canaan. It is much better for you to go back to Moab.”

In verse 14 we are told that they wept, that Orpah kissed Naomi, and she turned and went back to Moab, to her people and to her gods. But Ruth clave to her mother-in-law. She would not let go.

When Naomi says to her, “Look what Orpah, your sister, has done. Go and do the same,” she responds with these beautiful words: “Entreat 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.”

Probably most of you are familiar with those words. It is very likely that you have heard them in connection with a wedding. And how appropriate they are as an expression of the commitment that a man and a woman make to each other in marriage. “Don’t ask me to leave you. Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people; your God will be my God. Where you die, I am ready to die.” Those words are a vow as well as you see at the end of verse 17: “The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.” How fitting for a wedding. In fact, the word “clave” in verse 14: “Ruth clave unto Naomi,” is the same word that is used in Genesis 2 to speak of a man leaving father and mother and cleaving unto his wife.

But in the context here in Ruth 1, these are not words of commitment simply to another person. No, there is a spiritual

dimension to these words of Ruth. They are words of commitment to God and His people, words that show here a genuine conversion in Ruth. Think about these things.

First, think about the difference between Ruth and Orpah. Orpah, once she sees that Naomi is willing to go on alone, and after she hears what her plight will be in Canaan, turns back. She turns back, not just to the people of Moab, with whom she is familiar, but also to her gods and the gods of Moab. From an earthly point of view, this seems wisest. She will be happiest this way. But Ruth will not go back. Why not? What is the reason?

Well, it is not just so she can be with Naomi and care for her. That is a *part* of it, but if we think that is all, we miss something. Look at what she wants.

She wants to go where Naomi is going, that is, to Canaan. She is saying, “Let me come to Canaan, too.” She wants to live where Naomi will live, that is, in the promised land. She wants the people of Israel to be her people; she wants to be one of God’s people. She wants Jehovah, the God of Naomi, to be her God. She wants to be buried in the land of promise with God’s people. And in saying this, she is saying that she forsakes her own land, her own people, her own family, her own gods. This is a religious commitment to the God of Israel.

That is confirmed later in the book of Ruth, chapter 2:11 and 12, when Boaz says to Ruth that he knew that she had left her father and mother in the land of her nativity, and come to trust under the wings of the Lord God of Israel. That is conversion.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:37, 38, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.” Ruth here makes the necessary sacrifice to become a disciple of Christ, and she does this at considerable cost to herself. When all the providences of God seem to be against her and against Naomi, when her association with Naomi has brought only death and judgment, when her future as a stranger and a widow in a foreign land look bleak, she goes to Canaan saying, “Your land, your people, your God—they will be mine as well.” And to show her commitment, she makes a vow: “The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.”

What we have here is an outstanding example in the Bible of a genuine conversion. How different it is from what goes for conversion today. Today, for many, conversion is simply going to some kind of religious crusade or meeting or watching some televangelist and making a decision for Christ. And it goes no further. Modern Christianity places no demands on you. Conversion brings no change in you. Following Christ means no sacrifice for you.

Is that really conversion? No, it is a sham. But with Ruth, it is different. Her love to God is exclusive. It is complete. She knows Jehovah. She loves His promises and the promised land. She commits herself to His people. She forsakes her former life and people. And from here on, things in her life take a completely new, different direction. That is true conversion.

I ask you, is your commitment to Christ exclusive? What have you given up? Is your conversion something proved day by day in a life of repentance and discipleship? Does the commitment that you say you have for God include also a commitment to His people and His church and His Word and promises? All these are a part of true conversion. Ruth’s beautiful words here, and her subsequent life, show that her conversion was real and genuine.

But what a surprising conversion. How unexpected. I want you to think of the obstacles, from a natural and earth point of view, to Ruth’s conversion. In her conversion she resolves to go to Canaan, where she will be a widow with no means of support, and a Moabite—a stranger—among God’s people. Will she be received in Israel? And not only *will* she be received, but *may* she be received in Israel? Will the God of Israel receive her? In Deuteronomy 23:3 Jehovah had said, “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever.” Will she, can she, may she be received among God’s people? You would think these things would be cause enough for Ruth to hesitate and to turn back to Moab. Certainly these are things that made Naomi hesitate and even to urge Ruth to go back to Moab. She says to Ruth, “Go back to Moab, to your people and your gods. There you’ll find a husband and there you’ll have security and happiness. There’s nothing for you in Canaan.”

We need here to be critical of Naomi, and careful that we ourselves do not fall into the same sin. How could she say this to Ruth and to Orpah, her daughters-in-law? How can she encourage them to go back to Moab, to their gods, to idolatry?

Why not encourage them to come back with her to Canaan, where alone is the worship of the true God and salvation?

Naomi shows here her own spiritual weakness, her lack of faith. Yes, she has a family care, a physical concern for these girls. But that concern is superficial. She looks at them and says, “Well, they’re Moabites. They have their gods and I have mine. They have their families and I have mine. I can’t force this on them.” It is because she has no vision for their salvation, no real concern for their souls, no interest in bringing them into the covenant community of the people of God. She looks at them and basically abandons them as hopeless and lost.

What an obstacle to the conversion of Ruth. I think that we need to be careful not to fall into the same kind of sin. Too often the relationships of church-going Christians to those who are unbelievers are superficial. Too often we express little or no concern for their spiritual well-being. We have little vision for their conversion. We think it is impossible. We abandon them as lost. And sometimes it is because of our own spiritual weakness, as was true of Naomi. By our own disobedience, as in the case of Naomi, we too can paralyze our witness to the world. Or we look at others and we view them as impossible candidates for conversion. We doubt the power of God’s grace. And that is because we fail to understand how amazing is the grace of God that saved me. Sometimes we make excuses similar to the ones in Naomi’s mind: “Well, these people are outside the covenant. They are like the Canaanites.” And then, like Naomi, we become an obstacle to the conversion of unbelievers.

But look at this. How amazing, how powerful is God’s grace in the conversion of Ruth. Despite all this, despite the poor influences, in spite of the difficulties that lie ahead, in spite of her unbelieving background, in spite of her being a Moabite and a foreigner in Israel, in spite of a believer turning her away, she is converted by the grace of God. In verse 18, my King James Bible says of Ruth that she was “stedfastly minded to go with” Naomi. Literally, that is, she strengthened herself. She stood up to the opposition of Naomi. In verse 16 she says, “Entreat me not to leave thee. Don’t ask me to go back. Don’t stand in the way of my coming to Canaan.”

Where does that strength and that resolve in Ruth come from? The explanation for it is the grace of God. This strength and resolve do not come as a result of Naomi’s urging. They do not come because Ruth is promised a healthy and wealthy future. It is not a strength that comes from Ruth herself. No, it is God’s grace working in Ruth that makes the difference here between Ruth and Orpah. Orpah was exposed to all the same things. She went through all the same experiences. But God’s grace sets Ruth apart. As Romans 9:18 says, “God has mercy on whom he will have mercy; and whom he will, he hardens.” It is God’s grace, God’s mercy that causes Ruth to observe the work of grace in Naomi. It is God’s grace that gives Ruth a longing for what Naomi has and for Canaan and for the promised Messiah. It is God’s grace that gives Ruth the resolve to withstand the urgings of Naomi to go back to Moab. It is God’s grace that causes Ruth to see her sinfulness and her unworthiness and her need of the promises of God and the presence of the people of God.

The source of that grace in Ruth is God’s eternal choice of her in election. God chose Ruth, a Moabitess, as one of His

own children. In eternity, out from the rest of the Moabites, God chose her to be one of His, one who would be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, one who herself would be a mother in Israel to the promised Messiah. God is working in this history. God is working in the life and the heart of Ruth.

And that means for you today that if you have believed the gospel and if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, that is only because of the grace of God. You have nothing of which to boast in yourself. It is not because you made a choice to distinguish yourself from others. You are no more worthy than any other. Believing in Jesus Christ is a cause for humility. God has given us the grace to believe.

So we should earnestly desire to bring the Word of salvation to others.

As we conclude our message today, let us see God's purpose in the conversion of Ruth.

God is at work here. He chose Ruth, He regenerated her, He gave her faith, he brought her back to Canaan with a purpose. What was God's purpose?

One obvious purpose of God in this was the care of Naomi. Ruth becomes the friend, comforter, and support of Naomi. God knows the situation of the widow Naomi and provides for her in a special way. God knows the situation of those who are in a similar state today—widows, orphans—the Lord pities those of His people and provides for them.

A second purpose is to show us and to show Israel already back in the Old Testament that God always determined to save

and gather His people from all the nations of the earth—not from the Jews only. To Abraham God had said, “In thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” In the Old Testament, God often demonstrated this in the conversion of a Gentile. There was a wonderful promise in that. In Ephesians 2:19 we are told that believing Gentiles and their children have become fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God. The New Testament church is not a separate people from the Old Testament saints. But they are one, one spiritual nation, the one body and the church of Christ redeemed through His blood.

And then there is a third purpose in the conversion of Ruth. This is the main one. God's purpose in bringing Ruth to faith and bringing her to the land of Canaan was to bring Jesus Christ the Messiah. Ruth becomes the mother of Obed, of Jesse, and of David. How beautiful. In this history God is remembering His promise to send the Redeemer. He does it in the most remarkable and the most unlikely way. As the result of the sin of Elimelech and Naomi He brings Ruth, a Moabitess, to the promised land to be a mother in Israel of our Savior. This teaches us again that salvation is not by the will or the worth of man. From a broken family, an extinct family almost, God, by His sovereign, undeserved grace raises up the seed of the Messiah.

These are God's purposes. As God works, we do not always see His purposes. Naomi and Ruth could not see all these purposes. But to be sure, today, too, God works this way—mysteriously, His wonders to perform.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee again for the book of Ruth and especially for Thy faithfulness to the promise concerning Christ, a faithfulness shown in the most unlikely and surprising conversion of Ruth. How amazing, how powerful, how wonderful is Thy grace. Work Thy grace in our hearts always. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

January 22, 2012

The Homecoming of Naomi

No. 3603

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

I

n the book of Ruth, chapter 1, there are four main characters whom we can describe from the point of view of their relationship to the church. There is first Elimelech, who, for material reasons, leaves the church, and there are bitter results in his life. Second, you have Orpah. She is a woman who is exposed to the church and she rejects it by turning back instead to the worship of her gods in Moab. Third, you have Ruth, who, like Orpah, had her own people and her own gods, but by God's amazing grace and in the face of many obstacles, as we saw in the message last week, is brought into the church. And then, fourth, you have Naomi, who leaves the church and then, as a result of God's faithfulness to her in His chastening, is humbled and brought back to the church.

Today we are going to look at this homecoming of Naomi in the last verses of Ruth 1. In these verses Naomi comes home, not just to her land, her family, and the little town of Bethlehem, but she comes home to the church. She is brought back to be with the people of God. Here we have the prodigal

daughter coming back to her spiritual family. She is the lost sheep, found by the Good Shepherd, and brought back into the fold.

Verse 19 begins with Naomi and Ruth traveling from Moab to Bethlehem. In today's terms, that was not a long journey, only about 60 miles—something that we would travel today in just an hour or two. But for Ruth and Naomi, this was a hard slog that would have taken them one or two weeks on foot, ascending from the shores of the Dead Sea (about 1,400 feet below sea level), and climbing about 4,000 feet to Bethlehem, which sits at 2,500 feet above sea level.

After Ruth's confession of verses 16 and 17, we are not told much about their journey except that verse 18 tells us that Naomi was quiet about the matter. Maybe they traveled with an awkward silence, the grief of the previous decade hanging over their heads. Or it could be that Naomi came to accept Ruth's beautiful confession and that they went on in this pilgrimage with a kind of anticipation and hope.

But what lay before them in Bethlehem was not all roses. For there Naomi will have to explain the presence of Ruth and the absence of her husband and two sons. Besides this, they were widows. Yes, Naomi would come back to her husband's estate, but it would be of little use to her. It was springtime. And unless someone had planted the winter crops, the land would be barren, and her house, too, was sure to be run down or, after more than ten years, occupied by somebody else. Being widows, they were probably quite poor to begin with. So we can well imagine how they looked as they came, tired, poor, dirty, unannounced into the small village of Bethlehem.

All of this is described for us in the words of verse 19: “And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?” They asked each other a question: Is this Naomi? That was first a question of curiosity. Bethlehem was not a large city, more of a village, maybe just a few hundred people. Everyone knew everyone else. Whenever something new happened in town, soon everyone knew about it. Maybe you have been to or lived in a place like that. That can be uncomfortable. But it can also be quite pleasant.

Well, that is the kind of town that Naomi was returning to. She could not just sneak in under the radar. But instead, verse 19, “all the city was moved about them.” Her return caused quite a stir. They noticed her coming in. They began to talk. They gathered around her with their questions.

It is very interesting that, in verse 19, the Greek word for “they said” is in the feminine gender. The idea is that especially the women of Bethlehem were asking each other this question: “Is this Naomi?” That may have been because the men were busy in the field with the barley harvest. Or it may have been just this, that these are the ones who knew Naomi best. These are the women who had been her friends and companions, who remembered her. And at first, when she comes in, they maybe do not recognize her. They say, “Who is this?” and then, after awhile, there is some recognition and they say, “Is this really Naomi?” They are curious. They want an explanation. Is this the same Naomi that left here some ten years ago?

But it is not only a question of curiosity. It is also a question that expresses their amazement: Is this Naomi?! Can

it really be her?! Everyone in Bethlehem knew Elimelech and Naomi and what they had done more than ten years ago. The fact that they were Ephrathites indicates that they were people of wealth and status. They were landowners, well-known. Boaz, one of the wealthiest men of the city, was their close relative. The people remembered this family with their two strapping teenage boys leaving town. And occasionally over the years, they wondered about them—how were they doing? Would they ever see them again? But now they see Naomi and it is a total shock, a surprise. You can imagine that she has aged in more than a decade. And in her case, with all her grief, probably aged beyond her years. And now she is all alone. Obviously widowed. She does not have her boys with her either. So where are they? And there is this Moabitish girl with her. There is an amazement, an awkwardness. What do they say now to her? Do we talk to her? How has she taken all these years of suffering? And so they talk to each other: Is this Naomi?

But I want you to see that this is also a question of compassion. They do not ask this question in the tone of the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. Rather, the people here recall a difficult time of famine, a time when none of them knew what to do for food either. And they remembered that Naomi and family had left for Moab where there was bread. And now, when they see Naomi returning empty, they are touched with a compassion. There is a sadness mixed in with their astonishment. The subsequent history in the book of Ruth bears that out. You read of Boaz, a compassionate man, and his provision for Naomi and Ruth. But that was not just Boaz. This whole town pulls together for these widows. There is a compassion in their question.

And that means too that this is a question of welcome. Can this be Naomi? Yes, it is! And they call their friends and their neighbors: Naomi is back. Our sister has returned. They receive her with open arms. That is a beautiful picture of the restoration of a sinner into the fellowship of the church. Maybe there were a few of the carnal element here, self-righteous, who ask the question in spite: “Is this Naomi?” But the rest were overcome with joy—the joy of the shepherd who carried his sheep home on his shoulders and called his neighbors to celebrate—the joy of the father whose prodigal son returned, the joy of the angels in heaven at one sinner that repents rather than the ninety-nine who need no repentance. The people of God were glad that Naomi had come back.

Is that your response, too? If one who formerly walked in sin is brought, by the amazing grace of God, into the fold, is brought home, how do you greet them, how do you receive them? Would you rejoice and receive them with open arms, thankful that God did not let this one slide into the abyss of hell, thankful that He did not give them over to Satan and his power? Sometimes we can have a very self-righteous attitude, an attitude of superiority to someone who has fallen into a great sin or lived a sinful lifestyle before coming into the church. We look at them as second-rate. We say, I would never do what he or she did—that’s despicable! And we act as though that sinner really cannot be forgiven. God, maybe, can forgive them, but I cannot. And we will have nothing to do with them. Then the problem is not *theirs*, it is *mine*. I do not understand myself the power of God’s grace that has redeemed and saved me.

This is what the church is. The church is a company of repentant sinners. It is a fold of lost sinners who have all been

found. And so, first, we have here in the text Bethlehem’s question, a question of compassion and of welcome: Is this Naomi?

And then, in verse 20, we have a confession from Naomi in response to this question. Last week we looked at Ruth’s beautiful confession of commitment in verses 16 and 17. Here in verses 20 and 21 we have Naomi’s confession. It, too, is a beautiful confession—but in a different way. She says, “Yes, I am Naomi. But don’t call me Naomi. I’m a different person now. Call me Mara, for the Lord, the Almighty, hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me home again empty.”

By empty, she is referring first to her outward circumstances. She went out with a husband and two children. Now they are dead and buried far away in Moab. And, realistically, she has no hope of children again. Her family is ended, her seed cut off. All she has is what she carries back with her as a poor widow. She has ended up, spiritually, like Lot. He was wealthy. But he pitched his tent toward Sodom. And when God rained down fire on Sodom, Lot lost everything. Though he brought out of Sodom his wife and daughters, in their heart they never left Sodom. Naomi and her family, interested in material things, had gone to Moab. And now she comes back with nothing. She is empty. Looking at that, she says to the women of Bethlehem, “Don’t call me Naomi, but call me Mara.”

Now, to understand that, you have to know what the two names mean. Naomi means “pleasant,” whereas Mara means “bitter.” She is saying, “Don’t call me pleasant; call me bitter.

That's more appropriate, that describes me. Call me the Bitter One."

But now, let us not think that she is bitter against God. No, her bitterness here is the bitterness of repentance. For, notice her confession, and in her confession, what she says especially about God. She realizes that the Lord has brought this affliction on her. Four different times in verses 20 and 21 she says this. She is saying, "Don't try to tell me that these things happened to me by chance or by accident. Don't try to tell me I didn't deserve these things. No, the Lord did this to me." The two names of God that she uses here are very important. Twice she says, "the *Almighty* afflicted me." She means the sovereign God—God did this sovereignly. He was in control of these things that happened to me. And twice she says, "the LORD" or "*Jehovah* did this." That is the covenant name of God, the One who says in Malachi 3:6, "I am Jehovah," that is My name, "I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." She is confessing the sovereignty and the faithfulness of God to her in the emptiness that has come upon her.

She believes that God afflicted her in this way to speak to her. In verse 21 she says, "The Lord hath testified against me." "He was telling me," she is saying, "you've sinned in leaving Bethlehem for Moab and leaving the church." She describes the cup that the Lord gave her to drink as very bitter. Her husband and sons are dead—bitter ingredients for her to drink. But she does not *blame* God. She does not even blame her husband. She says, "It was my fault." In verse 21 she says, "I went out full. I brought this on my own head by what I did. God had every right to chasten me as He did. I went out. And in contrast to what I did," she says, "Jehovah has brought me home." By her choice she went out. By Jehovah's doing, she

came back. What she sees is the love of God to her in her affliction. She is saying, "I'm not here in Bethlehem because I made myself to differ, or because there is some good in me. I left in sin. And if God had not spoken, if God had not come in His grace, I would not be here. Think how obstinate I was. I had to lose all my family for God to bring me to realize where I should be. It was grace, amazing grace, the faithfulness of Jehovah God, that brought me home." What a beautiful confession.

Now that leads me to ask two questions of you. The first is this: How do you respond to affliction in your life? One response, quite common, is bitterness against God. How does God dare allow these things to come to me? Who does God think that He is? And then we shake our fist in the face of God in rebellion. But that is not the way of faith. The believer responds as Naomi does here. In Hebrews 12:5, 6, "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." And the writer to the Hebrews goes on to say, "Whoever heard of a son who was never chastened?" That does not mean that chastening is pleasant. Hebrews 12:11 says, "No chastening for the present seems to be joyous, but grievous." There was a grief for Naomi, a bitterness. But afterwards it yielded the peaceable fruit of righteousness in her because she was exercised by those things. May we have the grace to receive our trials from the Lord in this way.

Then the second question from Naomi's confession to you: Do you hear what Naomi, do you hear what this Word of God, is saying to you as a believer? Sometimes, for material gain, the child of God is tempted to leave the church. It may be for a

job or education, something that will in some way advance his physical well-being. And he thinks, “Well, that will make a brighter future for me and for my children.” What do you say to somebody who does that—leaving the church for material reasons? Sometimes it seems that such a one will not listen to anything that you say. Maybe that is you. Then listen to Naomi. Hear the Naomis of today who have done this: “I went out full; but I’ve come back empty.”

Look at what she lost. What did she lose? Everything—especially her family, her children. I can think of people like this. As a pastor I have talked to people who would say exactly this. In their younger years, forty or fifty years ago, they left the church. They had a relatively prosperous life, which was what they wanted. But spiritually, they suffered. Where they went for church was inadequate, departing. And their children were swept along with the tide of apostasy. And today, spiritually, they will tell you, they have virtually nothing. Their children are lost to the world.

I remember sitting with an elderly couple once that I visited, now gone to glory, sitting on their couch weeping about this very thing. Listen, will you, to Naomi? Listen to the Word of God. The most important thing that you can do for yourself and for your children is to be home with the family of God in the only place that the believer can call home—home in a church that is faithful to the Lord and to His Word. Do you hear the Word of God here?

Now, as we close today, let us remember that God was working also in this history. That is indicated in verse 22, where we read that Naomi and Ruth came back to Bethlehem “in the beginning of the barley harvest.” That was not an

accident. God brought them home at just this time. He did that, first, to provide for these two widows. That is going to unfold in the following chapters. What perfect timing! God brings them home at the time of harvest in order to provide for them. And in His care of them, God shows His compassion on these widows. To be a widow puts you in a difficult situation, a situation of dependence on the mercy of the rest of God’s people. And God provides for them not only in the timing here, but with a people who are willing to share their harvest with these widows in obedience to God’s Word.

But the barley harvest also has a spiritual significance. The barley was a winter crop. In connection with it, in the spring, there was a feast of thanksgiving called the Feast of Firstfruits. Those firstfruits were a promise from God that He would give more. And here, in the coming of Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem, God brings spiritual firstfruits to His people—a promise through Ruth especially to bring the Savior to His people. Here God is providing not just for these two widows materially, but through these widows to all His people spiritually. Their return to Bethlehem makes us think of another woman, heavy with child, coming to Bethlehem—Mary, so that Christ may be born as the firstfruits, the firstborn.

That is what is happening here. That is the bigger picture. God is working through this family and their circumstances to accomplish His eternal purposes, remembering His promise to His people to bring the Savior Jesus. For Ruth will become the mother of Obed, who begets Jesse, who begets David, from whom Christ is born. In His faithfulness to Naomi, God is remembering all His people in all of history. He works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for the grace that brings repentance.
Work that grace in us so that, forgiven, we may also forgive.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

January 29, 2012 The First Meeting of Boaz and Ruth

No. 3604

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Dear Radio Friends,

T

oday we are going to look at the first seventeen verses of Ruth 2. It is a rather lengthy passage so, if you are able to open your Bibles, that will be helpful.

One of the most important themes in the book of Ruth is the truth of the providence of God. In His providence, God sovereignly sustains and directs all things to serve His purposes. The purpose of God in all things is the salvation of His elect people in Jesus Christ. So He uses everything in their lives also for their eternal good and salvation.

We have seen that truth at work in the lives of Naomi and Ruth. In His providence God brought Elimelech and Naomi and their children to Moab. By His providence, He brings Ruth into their family. In His providence, He takes Naomi's husband and two sons from her in death and through this sorrow leads Naomi back to Bethlehem and to God's people there. Providentially, Ruth goes with her and, as we will see in the rest of the book, Ruth becomes an important part of God's

purpose in the salvation of His church. She becomes the great grandmother of David, from whom Christ is born.

Today we will see that God, in His providence, causes Ruth to cross paths with a man named Boaz, who will later become her husband. If you are married, you probably remember well the day that you and your spouse met, the first conversations that you had, and what your first impressions were. Well, those are the things that we have here in Ruth 2 in the first meeting of Boaz and Ruth.

What occasioned it was the Old Testament practice of gleaning. This was one of the civil laws of Israel in the Old Testament, a law that God put in place so that the poor would be cared for. Ruth and Naomi were poor. They had come back from Moab empty. So they have to glean after the harvesters for their food. If you were a landowner, then when it came to harvesting your fields, the law concerning gleaning said that you could only make one pass through fields. And you were not allowed to harvest all the way to the corners of your field but had to leave some grain standing there. And if, while you harvested, you dropped or spilled some of what you had harvested, you were not to go back and pick it up, but must leave it there for the gleaners.

Those who gleaned, then, were the poor: the widows, the orphans, and the strangers who could not own land. Gleaning involved walking in the fields behind the harvest workers and picking up what they did not take. It was hard work—from morning till evening—for just a little food.

Now, although we do not have the practice of gleaning today, there are some important principles here for Christian

stewardship. The first is that God owns everything. That is why He could tell the people what to do with it. The second is that stewardship involves generosity. If God has given to you, you must not keep it all for yourself but you must set some aside, or even leave some, for the care of the poor. A third principle here is that the poor should not just receive handouts. But they, too, should work for their food. The New Testament tells us that if a man does not work, he has no right to eat. The Bible tells us that, apart from exceptional circumstances involving ill health, age, or disability, we must work in order to provide for our earthly needs. There is no time, in Scripture, for laziness.

This Bible passage introduces us to Boaz and Ruth. In verse 1 we are told that Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of the family of Elimelech, and his name was Boaz. This is a very important detail in the book of Ruth. This gives Boaz the right to marry Ruth and thus to raise up a family in the name of Elimelech. If we think back to chapter 1, Naomi had forgotten about Boaz. She paints a very dark picture for Ruth and her prospects of marriage in Canaan. So now, when Ruth goes out to glean, she has no idea about Boaz being this kinsman.

Second, Boaz is introduced to us as a wealthy man. This gives him the ability to marry Ruth and to redeem the land that previously belonged to Elimelech. There were two parts to the duty of the kinsman: one was to marry the wife of the deceased, the other was to purchase back his land. Boaz is wealthy, so he will be able to do this.

Third, and most importantly, Boaz is introduced to us as a godly man. We read in verse 4 that when Boaz came in the morning to his fields, he greeted his workers by saying, “The

Lord be with you.” And they would answer: “The Lord bless thee.” Why does the Holy Spirit tell us this? It is because, if you are really going to know a person, this is where you will get to know them: in their personal life, in the home and in the workplace. You cannot know a person’s character by simply watching what he does on Sunday in church, for example, or observing his public life. But how does a man talk to and deal with the people in his daily life, with the people he sees every day in his home or in the workplace? What does he want for others? What are his goals for himself? Boaz says: “The Lord be with thee.” What an example, an outstanding example, of godliness.

And Boaz’s godliness comes out also in the way he deals with Ruth, who is a poor stranger. Quite easily he could have dismissed her and chased her from his fields. Instead, because he has a high regard for the law of God, he obeys the law concerning gleaning and his role in it. And because he understands the grace of God toward him as an Israelite, he remembers the stranger and the poor in the land. He does this as a wealthy man—not proud because of his wealth, but humbled at the graciousness of God to him.

Notice several things that show the godliness of Boaz.

In verse 5 he takes notice of Ruth. He asks his servants: “Whose damsel is this?” He is looking out for the poor and the stranger. In verses 8 and 9 he protects Ruth. He says to her, “Don’t glean in another field, but stay by my servants. I have charged the young men not to touch you.” There was a certain danger for a young woman to go out alone into this environment. But Boaz offers to protect Ruth. Then also he provides for Ruth. In verse 9 he tells her that when she is

thirsty, she should feel free to help herself to the drinks that he has provided for his workers. And in verse 14 he asks her to join him and his servants at mealtime, and he gives a generous portion of cornbread to Ruth—so much that she has leftovers to take home to Naomi.

Then notice his godliness especially in what he observes and admires in Ruth. He had never met her before. But he had heard about her. And there are two things that he recognizes in Ruth's character. One, her kind heart. He says, "It hath fully been shown me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother-in-law since the death of thy husband." And, two, he recognizes Ruth's faith, that she had come to trust under the wings of the Lord God of Israel and that, to do this, she had forsaken her own people and land. Maybe he had heard about Ruth's wonderful confession recorded in chapter 1: "Whither thou goest, I will go; where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people; thy God, my God; where thou diest will I die and there be buried." If he had, this is what he admired in Ruth.

What a man of godliness Boaz was.

But th