

STUDY QUESTIONS

Look at the following descriptions of Covenant and Kingdom written by Mike Breen.

- Covenant is the way in which the Bible describes and defines relationship: first our relationship with God and then our relationship with everyone else.
- Kingdom is the way in which the Bible describes and defines responsibility: first, our responsibility to represent God to the people we know and then to everyone else.
- Where do you see examples of these in the Book of Ruth (and in relation to the Lord, Ruth, Naomi, Boaz...)? *[as a side note you might want to consider whether you agree with Mike Breen's definitions of Covenant and Kingdom]*
- Which character do you relate to and empathize with most, and why?

APPLICATION

Pray that God would meet you where you are. Are you downcast like Naomi – why not complain and prayerfully voice your anger? Pray for courage and commitment like that of Ruth. Pray for the graciousness of Boaz. Pray that you would know the unfailing love of God.

BE MY REFUGE

1. To your strong arms do I flee
For they love unconditionally
Lord I need that love to be
With me when all has turned away

2. Come my kinsman redeemer
Draw me closer, nearer
To where you are my saviour
To you when all has turned away

*Hold me close Jesus
Be my refuge
When all else has failed
I will come to you*

3. Enfold me in your great wings
For they protect from all things
Your solid comfort do they bring
For me when all has turned away

4. Fend the darkness and storms away
For I am small and you are great
Never let this child sway
From you, i'll never turn away

*Hold me close Jesus
Be my refuge
When all else has failed
I will come to you*

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PLEASE PRAY FOR...

- **The families of Andrea O'Neill, Mike Moore and Audrey Watson (or those you know who are recently bereaved). Please pray for those attending the Service of Remembrance and Thanksgiving at St Mark's on Saturday 26th October.**
- **Vanessa Streeton, who has been diagnosed with cancer. Please pray for Vanessa and for her family (including her three year old child)**
- **Charlotte Stacey, who is on the transplant list for a kidney.**
- **Pat Lilley, who is in hospital after a fall at home.**
- **The Haynes family**

This week's study notes were written by Andy Patrick



St Mark's

**Inspiring each other to
love and follow Jesus Christ...
everywhere in everything**

INDIVIDUAL STUDY NOTES

**Week Beginning:
20th October 2013**

KINGDOM AND COVENANT: RUTH

WORSHIP:

Spend a moment in silence, becoming aware of God's presence with you. Give thanks for one thing in the week that you are thankful for. Praise God for a person who has been significant in your life.

READINGS: Ruth 4:13-18 (see also Matthew 1:1-17)

For those who are unfamiliar with the BBC programme 'Who Do You Think You Are?' here is the Beeb's very own summary of the show: 'Celebrities trace their ancestry, discovering secrets and surprises from their past'. To this nutshell description I'll add my own embellishment: '...cue emotional celebrity tearing up over the shocking news that great-great-great Uncle Herbert was actually adopted. Cut to camera close-up of tear rolling down celeb's cheek'. If I park my cynicism for one moment I admit that often the stories are genuinely moving. Indeed, it can be a fascinating yet risky business looking into one's own family history – preconceptions and presumptions can be shattered, unexpected details can emerge.

If we look at the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 we might find something similar. We find a long list of names that we can so easily wizz past or skim over, and yet if we look a little closer, and follow some of these names to parts of the Biblical story that have come before, we will be astounded by the drama of these lives – the twists and the turns, the surprise and the scandal, the thrilling highs and the dreadful lows. God's faithful love and saving work has been at work in, through, and often despite the individuals and families who make up the list. The ultimate example of victory through adversity – Jesus the Messiah triumphing over death and its causes – has been preceded by example after example, story after story, of God working against the odds, making good of seemingly hopeless situations.

One of these stories is to be found in the Book of Ruth. Seeing that up to this point in our 'Covenant and Kingdom' series there has been a distinctly patriarchal flavour, it is only right

that we redress the balance and throw in some matriarchal seasoning (in other words, the boys have had their turn and it's now over to the ladies to show us how it's done).

Here's an overview of the book: *(as an alternative challenge, I encourage you to read the book through in its entirety - it's only 4 chapters long and will take 15-20 mins to read)*.

Elimelech and Naomi are from Bethlehem, but famine has forced them to leave their beloved country, and live in neighbouring Moab (not the place you want to be if you, like them, are Ephrathites). They have two sons - Mahlon and Kilion. Tragedy strikes – Elimelech dies. The boys marry two local Moabite girls – Orpah and Ruth. They live there in Moab for ten years but then greater tragedy – the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion die. Now the three women are left without anything but each other, three widows with a scarily uncertain future.

News arrives that the famine in Bethlehem has passed, food is no longer scarce, and so Naomi packs herself off with her daughters-in-law and heads home. Part way home though, Naomi, desolated by her predicament, urges Orpah and Ruth to leave her on her way and head back to a better life with their mothers in their native land – “go back... the Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband”. The girls are adamant – “no, we will return with you to your people”. Naomi is insistent, lamenting her woes, and stressing that she is a lost cause – go... you'll have a better life without me. Orpah, reluctantly, is persuaded (and who can blame her!). Ruth is resolute – she's throwing her lot in with Naomi, “where you go, I will go” – home, people, God, future – an act of true commitment.

When Naomi gets home she lets everyone know exactly where she's at – “Call me no longer Naomi ('lovely'), call me Mara ('Harsh')”. “I went away full” she groans, “but the Lord has brought me back empty”. There are echoes of Job's story – ‘why has this happened?! What might I have done wrong?! Why has God dealt so harshly with me?!

While Naomi is overcome with anguish, Ruth is proactive. They are hungry widows and food needs gathering. She goes to the fields to gather up the grain that the harvesters have left behind (they would leave some of the harvest for the poor, such as for families without land, to gather).

A wonderful coincidence occurs. As she gleanes the grain in the field, Ruth meets a man of the family of Elimelech (Naomi's husband), a prominent rich man named Boaz. He discovers that the girl in his field is Naomi's daughter in law, and he is gracious to her. He looks out for her and ensures that she is protected from harm. She goes back to Naomi with an abundance of barley.

Naomi is surprised and delighted when she hears of Ruth's meeting with Boaz. Some of Ruth's proactivity rubs off on her – she has a plan. Ruth is to get herself washed and 'glammed-up'.

She is then to go down to where Boaz will be sleeping, and after he's had a good meal and is contented, she is to “go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do”. The uncovering of feet has, shall we say, more romantic connotations. Ruth does just as Naomi has encouraged. Effectively Ruth is proposing marriage... not simply propositioning.

Boaz is impressed. Ruth is a woman of commitment, loyalty and beauty. His mind is made up.

Yet, like in all good romantic dramas, there's a hitch. There is another kinsman, who owns the parcel of land that was formerly Elimelech and Naomi's. According to custom, he has first rights to marry Ruth (as the 'next in line', since Naomi is no longer of child-bearing age), and she will then be able to return to live (with her mother-in-law) on the land.

Mercifully, Boaz is able to resolve the dispute. He acquires the land. Problem solved. All is well. A story that begins so tragically ends with joy – *“So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.’ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.”*

We now see something of the wider significance of the life of this unlikely heroine. The name of Ruth's Grandson... King David. The rest they say, is history. “It is typical of biblical stories about ordinary individuals to show how they relate to God's wider and longer purpose”, writes John Goldingay, “This is indeed a story about God's involvement in the story of Israel as a whole, the story that comes to a climax with Jesus... it encourages readers to wonder how God's involvement in their everyday lives relates to a much bigger purpose; it encourages them to raise their eyes to a bigger horizon.”

Over a decade ago a friend of mine wrote a song, 'Be My Refuge' (see the lyrics on the back of the sheet), drawing on the language and themes of the Book of Ruth, and looking at the wider comfort of Jesus, our refuge. When she wrote it she couldn't have imagined the personal tragedy and pain that she would have to endure, and the depths of love that she would need to draw on from her 'kinsman redeemer'. She, like Ruth, was widowed at what should have been just the beginning of her married life. Additionally, she was left to bring up a baby son without the support of her husband. Life didn't get any easier, and further difficulties followed. Yet despite the turmoil and pain, her commitment to God and his purposes have spoken powerfully. The love, grace and beauty of God shine through her.

The Book of Ruth resounds with the themes of Covenant and Kingdom that we are exploring in our sermon series. It reminds us of God's love and concern for the whole world, for all people. God works out his purpose through the commitment of a foreign woman (even a Moabite!), in spite of a seemingly hopeless circumstance. It's a compelling reminder that God can work in and through any situation and can bring life and beauty from the ashes of despair.