

**Introduction:** As we focus on Elijah, we are reminded that the opposition and troubles which he faced were foreshadowed in the societal sin attested to in the book of Judges. The tragic break-up of the kingdom of David and Solomon, followed by the terrible idolatry when Elijah served the LORD, *all trace their beginning to the days of Judges*, “when everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” But take heart, in this week’s notes, we see that the LORD always has His faithful ones *right in the midst of dark days of apostasy*. We will see this in the days of Ruth in this week’s summer notes on that book.

**Mon/Tues: read Judges 21:1-2 and Judges 21:13-25.** How heartening is the book of Ruth. It is a book of beautiful romance, and of a widowed family in desperate need finding refuge under the wings of the LORD and his chosen protector Boaz, whom we’ll meet in subsequent weeks.

It starts out in the dark days portrayed in the book of Judges, which has as its *last word* a scene of marital chaos, when Israel resorts to their own carnal policies in order to seize wives for their bereft fellow Israelites, the Benjamites (Judges 21:13-23), whose few surviving warriors hid in the rocky refuge of Rimmon, (Judges 21:13). Because of the cruelty of Israel, there were no survivors of this civil war against Benjamin except these warriors - with no wives or children to rebuild their tribe.

Yes, it is true that there were *some Benjamites worthy of death* after the terrible sexual assault of Judges 19, in which the perpetrators of that crime are shielded by the rest of their tribe, but Israel as a whole, *in their misguided and cruel zeal* – almost exterminates this chosen tribe. So it was right, then, for them to grieve over what they had done in Judges 21:2 and 21:15 and to long for God to rebuild the decimated Benjamites. But the evil means they resorted to, wiping out one city to steal their virgins (Judges 21:10-14), and capturing more eligible girls to give to Benjamin in Judges 21:20-23, were all godless inventions because they proudly refused to renounce their rash vow that *none of their own daughters would marry with the tribe of Benjamin* (Judges 21:1 & 21:18). In that shame and honor culture, foolish vows can carry the power of life or death. We have all known religiously proud people who are over-zealous in keeping *one part of the Law* in order to cover-up their massive sins against other parts of that same Law.

Meditate and Pray: “*Oh LORD, save us from the proud and hypocritical spirit of the Pharisees, who strain at gnats but swallow camels. Do not allow us to cover over our disobedience to the weightier matters of the Law by assiduously tithing down to the smallest amount of mint and cumin. Deliver us as church families from the disunity that arises when lesser matters (such as the vaccinations arguments or worship wars in our day) are used to cover over our refusal to die to self and live for Christ alone. We pray this, Jesus, in your Name, as the Savior with burning eyes who can see through all our sinful stratagems and subterfuges. Amen.*”

**Wednesday: read Judges 21:23-25 and Ruth 1:1-7.** It is helpful for us to understand *that the book of Ruth is set in the spiritual darkness and moral chaos of the end of the book of Judges*. As Professor Iain Duguid says about those days in his commentary on Ruth: “*The final chapters of Judges show us in graphic detail a nation that had comprehensively lost its way, becoming every bit as bad as the pagan nations that were the previous inhabitants of the Promised Land... It was in these difficult days that a man named Elimelech moved his family out of Israel (Ruth 1:1).*”

In our day, salvation is understood as being *in Christ*. He is our “Promised Land”. We can live wherever God leads us to live, in spiritual safety, trusting God to help us to flourish where He has planted us. However, in the Old Testament, redemption into a saving relationship with the LORD was normally meant salvation within the Land which the LORD promised to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 15:18-20). To wander into neighboring pagan countries, which were given over to idolatry, was to depart from the LORD.

It is in this dubious light that we are to evaluate the choice of Elimelech to lead his wife Naomi and two sons into the land of Moab – a place given over to some of the vilest idolatry practiced in the ancient world. Moreover, Moab throughout Bible history demonstrates enmity towards God: their king Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22-24); their women had been a stumbling block to Israel, tempting them into idol worship and immorality (Numbers 25) and under their king Eglon they ruled Israel with crushing cruelty in Judges 3. So, to go to Moab is a serious mistake for Naomi's family.

Meditate and Pray: What then is to be our conclusion about Naomi's years in Moab, where her husband and sons died, leaving her and her two daughters-in-law widowed? Well, it certainly seems that these untimely deaths were a severe chastisement from the LORD – which Naomi herself confesses in Ruth 1:13, saying, "The LORD's hand has gone out against me."

But the deeper lesson, beyond the regrettable mistakes of Naomi's family, is that the LORD does not forget His people. Though they had suffered years of famine because of their sin, compare Ruth 1:1 with Deuteronomy 11:16-17, news reached Naomi, in the far-away place where sin brought her, that the LORD had remembered and visited His people with His grace – providing them rain and bread once again. So Naomi returns to her home and to the LORD.

The lesson? We learn that, in the end, Naomi's affliction in a foreign land the LORD used for her good. As Psalm 119:67 puts it: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word."

Sing about how the LORD uses our foolish mistakes and serious wrong turns to bring us back to Himself. Praise Him *especially* that, no matter how deep is the hole into which we have dug ourselves – God's grace can find us and show us the way to return to Him! Sing this old Salvation Army hymn, keeping in mind, that, in the last verse: the "spotless holiness in which we rest" is none other than Christ our Savior's alone. Though in this life, we shall never attain perfection, we trust in His perfect righteousness in our place!

*O God of light, O God of love,  
Shine on my soul from Heaven above!  
Let sin appear in Thy pure ray  
As black as on the judgment day;  
Let perfect love apply the test,  
And all that's wrong make manifest.*

*O smite and spare not, faithful God!  
A Father's hand still holds the rod;  
O make my sin-stained conscience smart,  
And write Thy law upon my heart  
So plainly, that my will shall bow  
In full surrender, here and now!*

*O take Thy plummet and Thy line,  
Apply them to this heart of mine,  
And thus reveal each crooked place,  
By contrast with true righteousness!  
Let holy truth condemn each sham;  
Show what Thou art, and what I am.*

*Work on in me Thy perfect will,  
In me Thy promise, Lord, fulfill;  
O make me quick to fight for Thee,  
And set my soul in liberty!  
My soul can rest in nothing less  
Than in a spotless holiness.*

**Thursday: read Ruth 1:8-18.** It is moving to read how Naomi seeks to dissuade her daughters-in-law from following her back to Bethlehem. “You are Moabite women,” Naomi says, “Go back home and find Moabite husbands – I cannot provide you with sons to marry since mine have been taken.” That is the gist of what Naomi says in Ruth 1:8-15. Most sad of all, at her lowest point, Naomi doesn’t know where her daughters-in-law stand with the one true God. She assumes that they will return to “serve the gods of Moab” in Ruth 1:15.

Yet, let’s not be too hard on Naomi. Her heartbreak in her hard circumstances make her *doubt the LORD’s hand on her* life. But notice that, in her despair, and despite her sinful doubts, Naomi is able to bless both Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, asking the LORD to show them His “hesed” love. That is what the word “kindness” in Ruth 1:8 means. It is God’s covenant faithfulness that Naomi places on her daughters-in-law’s heads as her special blessing for them.

Surely such a prayer for blessing was answered, at least in the case of Ruth! For Ruth’s response of faith silences Naomi in Ruth 1:16-18, as Ruth proclaims that, *even unto death*, she will not abandon Naomi, her people or her God. These words are some of the most beautiful expressions of faith in the Bible. Naomi must have taught Ruth to trust in the LORD, the God of Israel, as she says:

*“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.”*

The lesson for us is this: When the LORD commits Himself to us as our covenant God, His Spirit at the same time draws out our commitment to Him. Sing about such commitment, and ask the LORD to make this commitment more and more real to you:

1 Take my life, and let it be  
consecrated, Lord, to thee.

Take my moments and my days;  
let them flow in ceaseless praise,  
let them flow in ceaseless praise.

3 Take my voice, and let me sing,  
always, only, for my King.

Take my lips, and let them be  
filled with messages from thee,  
filled with messages from thee.

5 Take my will, and make it thine;  
it shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart, it is thine own;  
it shall be thy royal throne,  
it shall be thy royal throne.

2 Take my hands, and let them move  
at the impulse of thy love.

Take my feet, and let them be  
swift and beautiful for thee,  
swift and beautiful for thee.

4 Take my silver and my gold;  
not a mite would I withhold.

Take my intellect, and use  
ev’ry pow’r as thou shalt choose,  
ev’ry pow’r as thou shalt choose.

6 Take my love; my Lord, I pour  
at thy feet its treasure store.

Take my self, and I will be  
ever, only, all for thee,  
ever, only, all for thee.

**Friday: read Ruth 1:19-22.** Upon returning to Bethlehem, Naomi feels the searching gazes of the townspeople as they behold her much changed and weighed down by her burdens and hard life. They hardly can recognize her, and she confirms the deep waters she has been through when she asks these neighbors to call her no more “Naomi,” which means pleasant, but “Mara,” meaning bitter.

This name, “Mara,” has a sad history. When rebellious Israel, thirsty after three days in the desert, found bitter, undrinkable waters in Exodus 15:23, they were most bitter against the LORD and Moses. In short, they had no expectation that God could or would help them – even though just a few days earlier He had brought them through the parted waters of the Red Sea! They had only a bitter resentment against the LORD, fittingly highlighted by the naming of that bitter spring, “Mara.” Of course, their distrust against the LORD did not prevent *Him* from graciously providing sweet water through the miraculous log He directed Moses to use. God never deserves to be bitterly complained against by Israel, by Naomi or by us. Naomi would find her life sweetened by grace again.

**Sat/Sun: read Ruth 1:19-22 and Genesis 16:15-17:1-17.** Despite her bitter distrust of the LORD, Naomi’s faith is kept alive by the Holy Spirit, who alone preserves our faith from being quenched. This Spirit-maintained faith reveals itself, despite Naomi’s efforts to hide it. We see it in her words that the hand which has risen against her is *the Almighty’s hand* (Ruth 1:20-21). She knows that the LORD, the Almighty, is still in control of her life, and that it is *He* who has brought calamity upon her – all to bring her back in repentance to the land of salvation. By the way, the name, “Almighty” is “El Shaddai,” meaning the powerful One who can’t be resisted. Whatever the LORD decrees, He accomplishes; no one can resist His will – because He is Almighty. But also, this word, “Almighty” refers to *how God uses His power in the lives of His people*. He is not a brute, who simply has His way because He is stronger than we are. He is the Provider, the All-Sufficient One – whose very name promises that He will take care of us. We know this providing character is part of this name because of how often it is used when God’s people are most in need.

For example, Abram for sixteen years pursues his fantasy that Ishmael, the slave-girl Hagar’s son, would inherit God’s covenant blessing. This son, named Ishmael, was born when Abram was eighty-six. But his hopes are dashed in Genesis 17, when the LORD declares that this son of Hagar will not be the child of promise – but a miracle child to be called Isaac: *he* will be the child of promise – even though Abraham is now ninety-nine years old.

How then does God reassure Abram that He will keep His promise to give this child? He does so by declaring in verse 1, “I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless.” There is that name Almighty again. All through their wandering years in the land of Canaan, when they did not possess one foot of the land of promise, but waited by faith for salvation to come, God appeared to them as “El Shaddai,” the almighty provider. Let us sing about this great name, using this hymn about God’s provision (# 95):

1 Though troubles assail us and dangers affright,  
though friends should all fail us and foes all unite,  
yet one thing secures us, whatever betide,  
the promise assures us, "The Lord will provide."

3 When Satan assails us to stop up our path,  
and courage all fails us, we triumph by faith.  
He cannot take from us, though oft he has tried,  
this heart-cheering promise, "The Lord will provide."

2 The birds, without garner or storehouse, are fed;  
from them let us learn to trust God for our bread.  
His saints what is fitting shall ne'er be denied  
so long as 'tis written, "The Lord will provide."

No strength of our own and no goodness we claim;  
yet, since we have known of the Savior's great name,  
in this our strong tower for safety we hide:  
the Lord is our power, "The Lord will provide."

