

Bible Conversions (2) - Ruth

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 January 2015

Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Let's turn now to the book of Ruth, chapter 1, reading once again at verse 15. Ruth, chapter 1, verse 15.

And Naomi said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods. Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.

But where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.

May the Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts me from you. Last week we began looking at Bible conversions.

And we began with Manasseh, the account we have in the Old Testament of a remarkable conversion of Manasseh while he was a prisoner in Babylon.

[1 : 03] We're looking today at Ruth's conversion. And of course, we don't have an account of how she came to be a believer. But we know that there are things in this passage, in these verses we've just read, that tell us that she was converted, that she was someone who came to trust in the God of Israel, the God of her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Ruth was a Moabite. She came from that country of Moab. And although the Moabites were related in ancestry to Israel, because Moab were descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham, nevertheless they were foreigners.

They did not belong to the people of the covenant, the people of Israel. And so it's an account you have really in Ruth, in this wonderful little book, of somebody who began life as a foreigner, who did not begin life and did not have an upbringing in the ways of the Lord, and yet came to be a firm believer in the Lord and a follower of this God.

And what you find in these verses, we said last time that the incidents we have, the accounts we have of conversions, or people converted both in Old and New Testaments, will actually tell us something about conversion, and what conversion itself is about.

It's almost better that way, rather than just reading it in plain theological facts, although that's important. Just like it is with many aspects of our spiritual experience, and understanding of salvation, it's far better to actually see it in somebody's life, to see it in action, to see the elements of it as they're lived out.

[2 : 50] And that's what you really find in Ruth's confession, and Ruth's words here to her mother-in-law, Naomi. The characteristics of conversion, and what conversion is, are really there quite plainly in the words that she uses.

And there are two things that come across very strongly from these words. We'll look at that, and a couple of points under each of these two things. The two things are, she had an unbreakable allegiance to God.

That's really what conversion brings about. Conversion brings about an unbreakable allegiance to God. Secondly, she had an unashamed association with God's people.

That too is what conversion brings us into. An unashamed association with God's people. These two points. Now you notice first of all here, this unbreakable allegiance you had to God.

That unbreakable allegiance is something that comes about through conversion, as we said, because we're not born with it. She wasn't born with it, and we're not born with it.

[4 : 04] We're born with a bias to sin. We're born actually into the ways of serving sin, and serving self. And the Bible makes that so plain to us, and yet, it's not something that concerns us until God comes into our life.

Because serving self, and serving sin, feels right, to the person who's born into that, as we always are. It doesn't feel wrong to us to be self-serving, or self-centered, to follow ways in which we please ourselves rather than God.

It doesn't feel wrong to us. It's not a concern to us. Until God actually brings things to light. Until God actually begins to work in our lives. Until God begins this process of conversion, if you could put it that way.

And it's then that he digs up in our consciousness, in our mind, in our souls, in our conscience, that things are not right. That things are not as they should be.

That things need to change. Because serving self is actually the opposite of what pleases God. And here is someone who tells us, who teaches us, that, though we are born to serve self, and born into that, conversion takes us out of that, into the serving of God, into following the ways that God himself sets before us.

[5 : 34] And that's very obvious, really, from the Bible elsewhere. Let me just pick up a few texts in the New Testament. Colossians, for example. First of all, Colossians chapter 1, verses 12 to 14.

Here is Paul saying to the Colossians, We are giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints, the people of God in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He has transferred us. He has taken us out of one way of life into another. He's taken us out of the domain of darkness, under the power of darkness, of sin, of Satan, of the world.

And he's translated us. He has transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. We're all aware, these days, of things that happen in the world, where people are taken hostage, where evil minds think nothing of actually killing people in the pursuit of their own aims.

[6 : 47] And we've seen this week already, and recently, people who were taken hostage, whether it was in Sydney or Paris, wherever, but how the specially trained forces or police storm these places.

Sadly, some hostages are sometimes killed, along with the perpetrators of these evils. But the point is, they actually storm the place with the intention, if at all possible, of getting all of these hostages out from that situation, getting them out alive, and bringing them into security, into safety.

That's what God does. That's what conversion is about. It takes us out of the serving of sin, out of the domain of darkness.

It brings us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, the Son of his love, the place of security, the place of safety, the place of satisfaction. And you can see the same thing in the Thessalonians, when Paul wrote to them, just to pick up one other text, the end of chapter 1 there, is a well-known verse, where Paul is reminding the Thessalonians of how they received the gospel preached through him.

And this is an important emphasis in itself, that their conversion came about through the preaching of the gospel, through the gospel message reaching them in their pagan situation, in their pagan setting, amongst all that they had always been associated with and practiced in their pagan background in Thessalonica.

[8 : 25] They themselves, he said, the word of the Lord has sounded out from you, and your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

What a great situation to have for the apostle. He's more or less saying, you know, we hardly need to mention things about you, because it's evident to everybody, your faith is spoken about, your faith has gone out.

You've made it clear that you're now Christians. And he says, they report the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and through God and to wait for his son from heaven.

That's conversion. You turn to God from idols, not necessarily just the kind of idols they had in Thessalonica or back in Old Testament days, little card figures, things you set up on a pedestal or whatever, but the kind of thing that you actually have when you create for yourself an alternative to God.

When you actually have something which you know your allegiance is connected with and you follow instead of actually giving God that place in your life.

[9 : 45] So here is Ruth and here she is saying, don't urge me to leave you or return from following you for where you go I will go, where you lodge I will urge your God, your people shall be my people and your God my God.

My allegiance, she says, will be to your God, to your way of life, to your people. It's a new allegiance. It's a new situation that comes in with conversion.

And in fact, conversion really in that sense involves us coming to a willing acceptance of the Lordship of Christ.

We don't always live in terms of that perfectly. None of us can say that every day we live we are at every step of our journey consciously and gladly submitting ourselves to the Lordship of Christ.

we step out of the way. We do sometimes still please ourselves. We sometimes forget whose we are and to whom our allegiance is connected. But conversion nevertheless brings you to that allegiance where you accept the Lordship of Christ as the Lord of your life, the Lord of your heart, the Lord of your actions, the Lord of your mind, the Lord of everything you do.

[11 : 10] And in fact, you can go further on that and say that conversion really demands no less. If you came to someone who's converted and said to them, well, you know, you can accept Jesus as your Savior, but you don't need to have him as your Lord.

You can have him in order to cover your sins from God's sight, in order to be justified, in order to have your sin forgiven, taken off your record, but it doesn't mean that you need to go so far as to have your life controlled by him, submitted willingly under his direction, his Lordship.

Well, nowhere do you find that sort of idea in the Bible where there is that division made between Christ as Lord and Christ as Savior. If Christ is our Savior, then he's our Lord.

If we haven't accepted him as our Lord, we haven't accepted him as our Savior. You can't divorce the one from the other. And here is Ruth telling us that's what conversion really is about, and that's what a convert demands.

A convert demands that their life is lived in total allegiance to God. Nothing less than that will do for Ruth. And although Naomi is suggesting, or even strongly suggesting, that she should do what her sister-in-law has said, what Orpah has done, that she should go back to her native land, that she should go back to her own people, and to her life there.

[12 : 39] Moab really has nothing for Ruth anymore. She's done with it. She's not going back there. There's nothing there for her.

And every convert says that, I can't go back to what I used to be. I can't go back to that lifestyle, to that way of thought, to that attitude, to that approach to life.

I can't go back to live that way. I can't go back to all that's associated with the serving of sin and of self. I'm a new creature, I'm a new person, I have a new attitude, I've been given a new direction, I've been given a new perspective on life, a new outlook.

That's what I have to live by. So urge me, don't urge me to leave you or to return from following you. Transfer of allegiance, and that of course raises the question for myself, as it does for yourself, and I'm sure it's in your mind right now, where is my allegiance?

Where is my allegiance primarily directed to? Who is it directed to? Am I still following myself?

[13 : 57] has my allegiance been transferred so that I'm now willingly and gladly a follower of Christ?

So an unbreakable allegiance to God, there's a transfer of allegiance in conversion, but there's also a testing of allegiance, because this unbreakable allegiance that she now has for God is here severely tested, because Naomi is really providing for her, maybe not deliberately, but it certainly proves to be a very crucial and difficult test for her.

Go back to your people, like your sister-in-law, to her gods, to her people, to her way of life. And it's a crucial thing for Ruth to face up to making this choice.

Is she going to go back? Will she stay with Naomi? Will she make her way onwards to the land that Naomi belongs to?

Or will she now decide to go back to where she belongs to, or belong to originally in Moab? And you know, Jesus tells us that our allegiance to him will be tested.

[15 : 17] And our allegiance to him will be tested not just through particular events and special events and out of the ordinary events. our allegiance will be tested in the very ordinary daily issues of life.

Because as you go through the book of Ruth, and indeed through virtually all of the Bible, what you really find are the facts of life, of everyday life, as they are set out in the lives of these people that are mentioned.

This is just providence in the life of this woman, the way things have turned out in her life, the way that she has had day by day, these experiences, these events, these things that have unfolded in God's plan for her, and here she is now within that plan, facing a test, facing a choice.

Your allegiance to Christ is going to be tested. There will be times, many times, when the question will come into your mind, do I go on, or do I just give up on God?

you remember Jesus, and it's recorded in all the three Gospels, the first three Gospels, the parable of the sower, is how it's usually called, but it's probably better calling it the parable of the soils, because it's a parable about four types of soil, as you well know the parable, I'm sure, the parable of the four soils onto which seed fell as a sower went out to sow the seed.

[16 : 49] And only one out of the four soils actually produced a lasting crop. The first one really didn't have any growth at all, it's too hard and compact in a soil.

The second one didn't have much depth, stony soil, very thin shallow stuff. The third one, plenty of depth, but lots of weeds which choke the growth of the seed, and it didn't reach maturity.

And Jesus has explained that parable, really explained it in terms of these are the facts of life. The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches are what he meant by the thorns and the weeds that choke the seed.

seed. And it doesn't allow the seed to grow. The second one is just not having the depth, not having the total allegiance, having just an outward veneer of commitment.

When the test comes, illustrated by the heat of the sun, for a plant that doesn't have enough depth for its roots, it just shrivels, it dies. And Jesus says that's how it is going to be with your life in terms of allegiance to me as well.

[18 : 08] The crucial point is the condition of the soil that receives the seed, and that means the condition of our souls, the condition of our lives. What kind of life is it that receives the seed of the truth of God to enable it to grow?

It's the life of a convert, somebody whose allegiance has come fully to be transferred from sin and self to God, to Christ. That's what Ruth is. That's where she is here.

She's not going to go back. The test is something that she's facing up to, and her decision is, as it was when she first started following the Lord, this is the life for me. This is the life for me.

And it's like that in many opportunities that you have in life that are described, for example, in Hebrews and chapter 11 there, that great chapter on faith and examples of faith.

Verses 15 to 16 there in a kind of summary says, these people who lived by faith and died in faith, if they had been thinking, this could so easily apply to Ruth of course as well, and the words are so applicable to her context, if they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return, but as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one.

[19 : 35] Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. In other words, the writer is there saying, here are people who left in order to follow the ways of the Lord.

They left where they had been. And spiritually, you know what that means. It's this transfer of allegiance. And all the way through life, you face up to situations where the choice, again, has to be made deliberately by yourself.

Do I go on? Or is this thing that's come into my life, am I just, I'm just going to give up on God, am I?

This is not right, this is not fair. Some people do that, sadly. just like the parable says.

But Ruth is saying, no, this is my allegiance, this is where I want to be, this is where I'm going to continue to be. Remember Asaph, Psalm 73, we'll sing some verses from that at the end of the service.

[20 : 45] Asaph, this man of God, surprisingly, you wouldn't expect somebody like that to come to such a crisis in life, where he was saying, well, it would really have been better for me if I wasn't a believer at all.

He's looking out over the world, he's looking at the world of the ungodly, he's looking at the world that lives without any faith or trust in God, and in fact lives in opposition to God, and deliberately at times blasphemes God.

And here is Asaph saying, my life is so full of trouble, my life has so many problems, my life has so many things that the world doesn't have to think about, they don't have to think about eternity, they're not concerned about serious things like death, they just pass over these things, wouldn't life be easier if Christians were like that rather than the people of the world?

Why is it that my life has all of these things? Is that not unfair? fear? Until I went into the sanctuary of God.

Then I understood their end. You see, he saw things then in the light of eternity, in the light of what really is important rather than the things of this present life.

[22 : 01] And he knew he had been foolish in his thinking, but, and how he came back to wonderful words of commitment and recommitment in his allegiance to God, where he came to nevertheless, I am continually with you.

You hold me by the right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterwards you will receive me to glory. Whom do I have in heaven but you?

And on earth there is none I desire besides you. There's a man who is, if you like, re-converted because, as we'll see, conversion comes about more than once in people's experience.

There's the first conversion where you first begin to follow the Lord, but like Asaph and like Peter and like David, there will be reconversions, there will be times when you backslide, when you have to come back to God, but it just proves the unbreakable allegiance to God that conversion, or God through conversion brings about.

Maybe you're tempted today, through something in your own life, to give up on God. God, well, remember what Jesus said to the twelve disciples, in John chapter 6, when people were streaming away from Jesus, across the fields, away from him, they had been delighted to be with him, they thought he was a great miracle worker, but then he started making demands on them, that they accept him, that he be the means by which they had eternal life, and so on, and that was going too far, and they didn't follow him anymore, and Jesus used the occasion, just like God in the experience of Ruth used this occasion as a test for her too, where Jesus said to them, will you also then go away?

[24 : 13] That's where you have Peter's famous response, Lord, to whom shall we go? Where else can we go? Where are you going to find someone to bear the burdens you have the way Jesus does?

Where are you going to find somebody whose compassion and care is anything like his? Where are you going to find such a hope as Jesus gives to his people through conversion, that gives them the hope of eternal life, which is a certain hope, it's not a faint thing, it's not something that is here today and gone tomorrow and then reappears magically and comes and goes, it's a hope that says, I know that when this world is no more and when I am no more in this world, I shall be with him and I shall see him as he is and it will be far better.

to whom then shall we go? That's what Ruth is basically saying. You have the words of eternal life.

An unbreakable allegiance to God. Secondly, an unashamed association with God's people, very briefly. She has a sense of belonging to God's people, where she says, for where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people.

We spoke to the children about their new syllabus called click. Click, where things connect together. That's what God does when he comes into anybody's life.

[25 : 53] He doesn't leave them as an isolated individual. Indeed, that's what sin has caused. Sin has brought about fragmentation. We'll see this evening, God willing, the essential of unity.

And what God does in his grace, is bring about unity. Sin has broken our lives. Sin has caused disruption and separation, not just from God, but between people.

And God, by his grace, and God through the gospel, and God through our conversion, what does he do? He mends what was broken. Mending what's broken means when he comes into your life, when you come to be converted.

You're clicked into place, into this family of God, the spiritual family that live as believers in Christ. And that's what Ruth is saying.

I belong to this family. I belong to these people. I have a sense of belonging to the family that Ruth, that Naomi, my mother-in-law, belongs to.

[26 : 57] And that's what I want to belong to, and that's what I want to continue to be with. And in other words, your conversion is connected with your adoption, what the New Testament calls an act of God whereby he brings you to belong to his own family.

And there's only one family. It's not called a denomination. It's not the free church, it's not the Baptist church, it's not the Anglican church, it's not the Roman Catholic church.

family of God cross all denominational boundaries. You find the family of God in every denomination and sure.

You find it where you least expect it. They're all bound together by one thing. They've been converted to Christ and by Christ. They've transferred their allegiance to him.

They're saved people. that's what Ruth belongs to. She belongs to that family. And that is itself a mark of conversion.

[28 : 05] If you're converted, then you're glad to belong to this family. One of the things we desperately look for in life is security. Where do you have your spiritual security?

It's within this family of God, isn't it? Within the ranks of the converted, within those people who can say like Ruth, your people shall be my people and your God, my God.

This is the family. I belong to this where I want to remain. This is where I have a sense of security and of well-being. So that whatever happens in the course of my life, this is not going to come to an end for me.

And I'm looking forward, you might say Ruth is bringing across to us, this is what you conclude from what she's saying. And what the Bible teaches, this family of God, as they live in this world, they're looking forward to being together at last, with an uninterrupted family life in the presence of God in heaven.

What a great thing it is, friends, to have God as your father. I don't mean just in the sense of God being our creator, but in the sense in which through being converted, converted, what does Jesus do when he comes into our lives, when he changes us, when we are transferred from one dominion to another, when we're taken into the family of God, well, it's like Jesus really, as you like to picture it as Jesus, the son of God, God in himself, and he's taking you as he converts your life and takes hold of your life, and as you come under his lordship, you can just picture him bringing you to these wonderful ornate doors of heaven within which father lives, and Jesus says, now I want to introduce you to someone very special, let me introduce you to my father, because he's now your father too, your loving father, your caring father, your gracious father, father, your father, whose love will never let you go, whose love will at times even strike you in order to bring you back to himself when you've strayed.

[30 : 36] A sense of belonging comes with conversion, and with a sense of belonging comes that sense of security, authority, and there's also this unashamed association with God's people has finally a share in their destiny, a share in what is the future of God's people, in other words, share in their destiny, it's very interesting, just read this when you get home again, just this first passage, and look at the difference between the way Moab is described, and the way the land of Israel, Bethlehem Judah is described, because Moab is called a country, whereas Bethlehem Judah is the land.

Now remember from Abraham and the studies of his life how important the land was, the land is just full of theological and spiritual meaning, and all the way through the Old Testament, the land, as God described it to Abraham as his inheritance, is so important because he brings before us what God has as a future for his people, the inheritance, the spiritual inheritance, of which Canaan is the representation or a picture.

And the theology that's built into this passage in Ruth is a theology that makes a distinction between the country of Moab and the land of Bethlehem Judah.

you know, we're told, and we're told ad nauseam by humanists or atheists or whatever they call themselves, that if you become a Christian, it really narrows down your life and your perspective and your take on things, and it really does restrict you enormously, and really it's pointless anyway because God does not exist, so why should anybody waste their lives and restrict their lives and just squeeze their lives so narrowly just to follow a few commandments and to follow what are claimed to be the ways of Christ.

Don't become a Christian, it just spoils your life, it just narrows things down, it compresses your life, does it really? It actually is the opposite.

[33 : 02] Because by conversion, Ruth is actually brought into an expanse that lies before that she just cannot measure. She has the land to look forward to.

She's left the country of Moab behind, that's what's restricted, that's what's small and narrow and hardly significant. Compared to the land, compared to the promise of God and the inheritance that he's given his people, conversion brings you into a vast expanse that God gives you as an inheritance.

Psalms 16 that we sang shows that so clearly. The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places. I bless the Lord for the inheritance that I have got.

What is his inheritance? Well, he answers it, God is my portion. Can you measure that? Is that narrow?

Does that make life unbearably squeezed in when God is your portion? When your whole eternity means the enjoyment of God?

[34 : 18] I don't think that's narrow. That's not restricting your life and your options. Corinthians. And if again you go to 1 Corinthians, Paul says something quite remarkable that we can finish with in chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians where he's been dealing there with the privileges of being a Christian, of being a follower of Christ, of being someone converted to Christ, and so on.

But he's of course dealing with divisions in the church and Corinth as well. But this is what he says as a reminder of the privilege that they have. And they've got to put their divisions really to one side and think of themselves like this and stop doing what they're doing in all of their dissensions and divisions.

Because he says this is really the reality. Do you not know? And he so often says that. Do you not know?

You see, when you think about what we should be and how we should behave, Paul always takes them back to saying, do you not know what you are? Because what you are to be in your life, what you are to be in your behavior, what you are to be doing, goes all the way back to what God has made you, what you are.

He says, this is what you are, you are the temple of God. You are God's people. So he says, let no one boast in men.

[35 : 51] for all things are yours. Is that restrictive? Is that a narrow way of life?

All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours.

in a sense, he is saying actually everything belongs to the people of God because they share the victory with Christ.

There will be trials, there will be testings of our allegiance and of our association with the people of God. God. I'm sure you all know about Johnny Erickson Tata, well-known American Christian woman, paralyzed in a riding accident, written many wonderful books.

[37:06] And holding on to our allegiance to God and our unashamed association with God's people. This is what Johnny wrote. This paralysis is my greatest mercy.

Sometimes she says, God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves. Wonderful words.

let's remember that. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you will accomplish all that you have promised to do in the life of your people and that you will do so in a way that you yourself have chosen.

[illegible]