

*So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.<sup>14</sup> The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel!"<sup>15</sup> He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."<sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him.<sup>17</sup> The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:13-17)*

### God Previews his Plan

My family will tell you that I hate missing the previews. If I understand correctly what the movie theaters are doing, the time that they list for the show to start is really the time the previews start. I only figured that out a year or two ago. I used to torment my poor wife trying to get everyone out and to the theater on time so that I could see the previews. I still insist that we get there in time to do that. I love a preview. I love seeing what new movies are out there that I haven't heard about yet. I love getting a taste of them and getting excited about seeing them. Of course, that's the whole point of the preview. Whether you enjoy going to them or not, they clearly are a very effective tool, because Hollywood never stops putting them out. You can go on line and see hundreds of them and some of them become YouTube's most watched videos. At the risk of comparing God to Hollywood – which I really don't want to do for fear that lightning might strike me – God also makes use of previews. For thousands of years before Christ came, God gave his people little tastes of what Jesus was going to do and what he was going to be like. He used one prophet after another to keep his people watching and hoping for their Savior. Today, we have an example of that. It's not a famous prophecy. It's a specific moment in history. But in the events that God recorded right at the end of the book of Ruth, God was showing his people what was coming. **God previews his plan.**

#### I.

Of course, all previews give away some of the details of the movie. You can't get people interested without giving them some sense of what's coming. When the studio does a bad job, they give away all the details and there's almost no reason to see the movie. But in God's case, he did want to give away a great deal of what Jesus was going to do. Now, there was plenty in the life and words of Christ to hold anybody's attention. But God did reveal a number of major themes and truths about Jesus before he came. Today, we see **God previews his plan. He previews the coming of the King.**

In our gospel lesson for today, we heard about the wise men coming and asking, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" And that sent Herod – the king – into a tizzy. Why? Because he was not the ancestral king of Israel. The Romans had put him on the throne and he held on to power by brutality and cunning – the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem was such a small part of what he did that it didn't even make it into the other histories that were written at his time. Herod was really only half Jewish. He knew, just like everybody else knew, that God had promised King David that his heirs would be the rightful kings of Israel. And for over 400 years, his heirs reigned in Jerusalem. Even after the kingdom was destroyed, his descendants continued to exercise leadership for a while. But by the time the wise men came to Jerusalem, the dynasty of King David hadn't ruled in Jerusalem for hundreds of years. So what was the problem? God had made a promise and the people remembered it. God had given not just one preview of the reign of the Son of David, but many. When Herod asked where the king should be born, the priests knew, because Micah had told them it would happen in Bethlehem. God had spoken of that Son of David ruling in Jerusalem forever, which made Herod very nervous.

But what does that all have to do with Ruth and Naomi? Ruth and Naomi lived before King David was born, before God gave the first of that long line of promises. He had given other previews of Christ, but they had not yet focused on his job as the true king of Israel. So why am I talking about it today? Because of the last verse: **"The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."** Now, Naomi was not the mother of the child, Ruth was. But her own sons were dead and Boaz, the child's father, was her closest relative. So under Jewish law, his son became her

heir, as well as his father's. More important is the child himself. His name was Obed and we know almost nothing about him. But we do know a little about his son: Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David. And the fact that the book of Ruth ends with David's lineage tells us that it was probably written during his reign. And it was written to show the hand of God in the house David generations before he was born. God controlled all the events that led up to his life so that he could take the throne when the time was right.

David was a kind of visible prophecy of Jesus. God held him up to help the people understand what kind of king was coming. Then he showed the difference by saying that Son of David would rule forever – something no human king can do. When you and I think about kings, we tend to focus on their power. They can give orders. They can make laws. They can chop off heads if they want to. Ancient kings did all those things. But they also had one more key function: they commanded the army. They defended their people. Sometimes they had to come and rescue their people when they were already under attack. Their job was to fight the battles of the people and keep them safe from their enemies.

That's what Jesus did. He came here to fight our battles. The first and the greatest battle he fought was against sin, death and hell. Understand what sin he fought: our own. He didn't come into the world to take on the enemies of his kingdom and defeat them and set up a new world power in Jerusalem. His disciples thought he was going to do that and millennialists still think it today. But Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. He let Pilate arrest him and kill him. He did not come so that we can establish a Christian nation on this earth. He came to fight against the enemy that kills us and sends us to hell: the sin in our own hearts. How many times, my friends, in just the last week has your own heart betrayed you? How many times has it caused you to say nasty or selfish or rude things to people around you? How many other sins did you commit just while we were celebrating Christmas? All that sin shows that you and I were born with sinful hearts and those sinful hearts never stop trying to drag us into more and more sin. Those sinful hearts are our greatest enemy because they are still trying to drag us down to hell.

But they aren't alone. The devil works every day to tempt us and torment us. And the world around us does lead us astray. But Jesus came to defeat them all. He did that by dying. When he lost, we won. When he died, he paid for all our sin, for all that these sinful hearts lead into day after day. Then he rose and crushed the devil's hope of dragging us down to hell because now we're forgiven. Jesus rescued us from our greatest enemy: our own sinful heart and the hell it deserves. How was it possible for him to do that? Because that King who was born of a virgin was more than just the descendant of David. He was the true Son of God come to win our battles and set us free. He was the only king that could ever protect us, could ever rescue us, could ever bring us home to heaven.

And our King continues to fight for us. He watches over us and the devil can do us no permanent harm. He works through the gospel to strengthen us to fight temptation and to repent when we sin. He even holds the power of this world at bay. Now, he's working secretly, but he never stops fighting for us. The truth is, he secretly rules this world. He is coming back to reveal his rule and to judge the world and to set us free at long last from all that sin does to us. Jesus is the true king. He came into this world through the physical line of King David. Mary was his David's descendent. He will indeed rule over the true people Israel – all believers – forever. Before God even gave the promise of the coming of the Son of David, God previewed him with the genealogy of David, the genealogy of Christ.

## II.

That's not the only preview that we see in the story of Ruth. God showed us another major theme of the Scriptures and of the prophecies about Jesus, and it focuses especially on Ruth. **God previews his plan. God previews the outreach to the gentiles.**

The story of Ruth is unusual in the Old Testament because the star character was not Jewish. She was a gentile, like you and me. In the beginning of the book of Ruth, there was a famine in Israel. So Naomi and her husband and their two sons moved to the neighboring country of Moab. Both sons grew up and got married there. Both of the girls were from that country. Well, in the course of time, all three of those men died. Widows didn't have much in the way of rights or opportunities in those societies, so Naomi decided to go back home, to Bethlehem, in hopes that her family would take care of her. Both of her daughters-in-law initially were going to come. But Naomi managed to talk one of them out of it. But Ruth insisted on coming. She refused to leave her aged mother-in-law to make the trip home on foot and to survive as best she could. And she wouldn't leave the faith in the true God that she learned from her family. So Ruth went with her, and

worked to support them, and eventually she married Boaz, that relative of Naomi's that we mentioned earlier. She gave birth to Obed.

Ruth was a foreigner who made a place for herself in Israel. But God had a deeper role for her, a role that she could not possibly have foreseen: she was one of the physical ancestors of Christ. To the people of David's own time, God underlined the fact that his great-grandmother was not Jewish. That's the kind of thing that dynasties usually hide, but God made sure no one could deny it. So when Jesus was born a thousand years later, he was Jewish. But he had this gentile ancestor. God was telling his Old Testament people and his New Testament people that he valued the gentiles.

And he made it clearer. Again and again, God promised that the gentiles would come to faith. Abraham lived more than a thousand years before Ruth, and God promised that through him all nations of earth, not just Israel, would be blessed. Through Isaiah God said it was too small a thing for the Savior just to be the Savior of Israel. His name would go to the ends of the earth. God promised more than once that we gentiles, who were not his people, would have a place in Israel. Of course, Jesus' Great Commission was to go into all the world. Within a generation of that commission, there were far more gentiles than Jews in the Christian Church and that has not changed.

My friends, God was giving a preview of you and me when he arranged for the greatest king of Israel to have a gentile for an ancestor. God was previewing his eternal love for us when he included a gentile in the ancestry of Christ. We are not some kind of afterthought. God's plan always included us. We are part of his people today. The reason that I'm making such a big deal about this is that today, we're celebrating Epiphany. Today we begin a new season of the church year in which we're going to talk about Jesus and his miracles, because one of the themes of this season is that he is true God. That's why he alone could win our battle. But the other theme of this season is that Jesus is not only the Savior of the Jews. He is the Savior of the world. He is our Savior. God loved us with an everlasting love. And he sends us out into all the world to tell that good news to every person. Because Jesus died and rose for us all.

All that God previewed for us in the little town of Bethlehem a thousand years before Jesus was born. You know, sometimes, when you go to the movie theater, the preview turns out to be a big disappointment. It made the movie look way better than it actually was. I remember my dad once saying that all the good scenes in a movie we had just seen were in the preview. Well, God didn't make that mistake. The preview grabs our attention and points us forward. But the fulfillment is even greater. We will spend all this Epiphany season, we will spend the rest of our lives and all eternity, wondering at what Christ did for us. Amen.