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CHARACTERS OF THE BIBLE

By ERIK ROUTLEY and TREVOR HUDDLESTON

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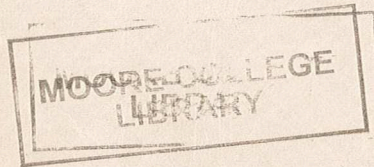
RUTH · KING AHAB · JONAH

by Erik Routley

THE RICH YOUNG RULER · THE ELDER BROTHER
THE WOMAN WITH THE ISSUE OF BLOOD

by Trevor Huddleston

Broadcast talks in the 'Lift up your Hearts'
series, given by Erik Routley and Father Trevor
Huddleston, C.R., during the week February
2-7, 1959, while they were jointly leading the
Mission to the University of Leeds.



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I

RUTH

I WANT to talk with you on the first three mornings of this week about three people in the Old Testament. One is a really delightful person—we are going to think about her this morning. The second is a weak and stupid and irreligious person, and we'll have him to-morrow. The third is the unpleasantest of the lot, because he is both nasty in himself and also religious. We'll leave him to Wednesday. But they all have a place in the story that the Old Testament is telling.

Well, then; we'll talk first about Ruth. Her story takes up three pages of the Bible, between Judges and First Samuel. In Judges you read stirring tales of heroes and villains, politicians and gangsters; in Samuel, you read about the kings and princes and prophets. Between the two, you turn aside to read about this lovely young woman, and what happened in her village.

It began where three men in one family died about the same time. Naomi was the hardest hit; the three men had been her husband and two sons, and she was left alone with her two daughters-in-law. One was Ruth. Naomi was generous in her grief. She said to the two girls, "You go off and find yourselves husbands. I'll manage somehow on my own"—for to be, or to remain, unmarried was a much more lamentable thing in those days than we think it is now. They had a perfect right to go, and the other girl went off and found herself another husband. But Ruth said, "Whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I

will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

Stop for a moment and think just what that meant, in the way of loyalty and self-sacrifice.

The story goes on to tell how Ruth stayed with her mother-in-law; and how one day at harvest-time she met Boaz—rich, well born, attractive. In the end they were married. They had a rough passage because Naomi, with the best intentions in the world, interfered. But the way Ruth and Boaz faced that situation and faced each other is a model for all courting couples to this day—their generosity and their reverence.

But when you read this fine love-story, read it right through. In some dull-looking little verses at the end of the book you are told that Ruth and Boaz became the great-grandparents of King David . . .

Now let me tell you what I think that story is doing in the Bible. I think we are too ready to believe that the famous and powerful people are the only people that God uses to help him make history. We are inclined to forget how much God values loyalty, self-restraint, generosity, and plain, common kindness, wherever they are.

Remember: St Paul said, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels: though I understand all mysteries and all knowledge: though I bestow all my goods to the poor and give my body to be burned (that is to say, though I become a great public benefactor or a great religious figure)—if I have not charity, it is all worth nothing." Plain common kindness of heart: that is what matters.

II

KING AHAB

NOT all the people who are mentioned in the Bible are there to show us how to live—not by a long way. Some of them seem to be there to show us how not to live. Ahab is certainly one of these. You'll find his story at the end of the First Book of Kings.

Ahab was a king who wanted the fun of power without its responsibilities. He is not the last ruler of whom that could be said. Ahab was the weak kind of scoundrel who, whenever he does something really shabby, exasperates you by making you say, "Well, poor fellow, perhaps it wasn't his fault."

What about that affair of Naboth's vineyard? It was next door to the palace, and Ahab wanted it. But Naboth would not sell. Ahab said to his wife, "He won't sell. I don't see what I can do." His wife, whose name, Jezebel, is one of the blackest in the Bible, said, "Ahab, what are you about? Be a man. If he won't sell, take it." "I can't do that," said the king. "Leave it to me," said Jezebel, contemptuously and had Naboth murdered.

I don't think there is a penny to choose between those two—the greedy little man and his domineering wife. Those are the people who spread misery in the world. Those are the people who make life unbearable in offices and factories and homes.

As a matter of fact, they are often cowards. Ahab was one.

But I want to tell you how Ahab died. He died in the war

between Syria and Israel. Just before they went to war, Ahab had called a meeting of his advisers and was sitting with them in what the Bible calls a "wide place" with all his royal robes and jewellery on him, asking whether he ought to declare war on Syria. All of them said, "Why, yes, if you say so, let's make war"—all except one, one who stood out and said, "This is madness. You are bound to be defeated." He was unlike the rest in many ways, this one; he had been in prison for his courage and outspokenness before, and soon found himself back there again. That is what happens to people like that under rulers like Ahab.

So they went to war. But Ahab said to the leader of an allied army, "I've been thinking. If I go in my royal robes, they'll recognize me and shoot at me. You put on your royal armour and I'll disguise myself." It looks as if Ahab took a private soldier's uniform and went into battle like that. In they went, and of course everybody went after the other man, thinking he was the king. They soon found out their mistake: but although Ahab escaped then, the story goes on that he was killed by the merest accident—a "bow drawn at a venture,"—some half-witted Syrian shooting blind.

So he went down to an inglorious death, and neither his vanity nor his cowardice did him any good.

May I remind you of another thing Paul said about charity? "Charity is patient and kind. Charity is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. It is not irritable or resentful. Charity never fails."

Charity never fails. Charity is the Christian's uniform. Keep your uniform on in the battle. When it came to the greatest battle of all, our Redeemer did not lay his aside.

III

JONAH

I REALLY think that if God could use Jonah for his good purposes there is some hope for some of us—especially for some of us parsons—if we will have faith.

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah," says the Scripture, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me." What would you expect a man to do if he were asked to go and "cry against" a "great city"—against Birmingham or Edinburgh or Leeds? I don't know whether Father Huddleston and I have been sent to "cry against" the University of Leeds and tell them what a pack of sinners they are, but I don't think that is exactly what we have been up to.

No. But suppose there was, in some great city, or in your own town, some scandal: some outbreak of vice or oppression. Suppose it were your duty to go to the City Council, or to a specially called town's meeting, and denounce it. You would then be like Jonah at the beginning of this story. You might be tempted to do what he did.

Jonah said, "Yes, I'll go," and caught the first ship for Spain. (You are supposed to be going to Birmingham: you catch the first train for Perth: that is the kind of thing.) The curious adventure of what the Bible calls "the great fish", which is all that some people know about Jonah, brought him back to the right place and set him in the way to Nineveh. So he pulled himself together and went there.

As he went, he said to himself, "Well, there's one com-

fort in this. I shall have the pleasure of watching God punish this lot. They've asked for it, and when I've done with them, they'll get it." He was that kind of person.

When he arrived, he said what he had to say, and to his enormous surprise, the people saw the point. "Yes," they said "you are right. Thank you for telling us about this. It must be put straight at once."

Jonah was horrified. He had never been so disappointed. He had been looking forward to coming home and saying, "They took no notice of me, and now they've bought it. Serve them right." And the story goes that God had some severe things to say to Jonah about this. God said to him, "You are a fine fellow. You are very good at criticizing other people; you are very good at talking about my wrath. But don't you realize that I *love* them? I love the men and women and babies and cats and dogs and cows. I love the rich and the poor and the religious and the faithless—I love them all, and I want them to know it. You have shown them that I do. Why are you so disgruntled about it? Rejoice with me!"

I Corinthians 13 has a wise word on this: "Love rejoiceth not in iniquity." Real love never gets any pleasure out of somebody else's shortcomings.

I want to leave you with two thoughts from this story.

First: when you are disposed to criticize people or movements or "Them," don't be like Jonah. Don't be complacent or superior. Watch out for the first stirrings of disappointment inside you if the people you are talking to listen to you and leave you with nothing to criticize. Leave it alone unless you really want to help.

Second: it would have been a great pity, wouldn't it, if the people of Nineveh had said, "He's a nasty little man; take no notice of him." The truth is sometimes spoken by people we don't like or people we can't respect.

But it's still the truth.

IV

THE RICH YOUNG RULER

ON a sunlit afternoon in a village street, Jesus was passing by: word of his coming had spread: the crowds had begun to gather before ever he reached the first simple houses on the edge of the little town. "Haven't you heard? ... It's this young prophet from Nazareth ... the one whose hands have healing in them ... who is said to have given back sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf ... he's on his way. And his voice, and his words! They say you just can't stop listening when He speaks. He seems to have a new message ... or at least He preaches the old one with new power, new authority ... They say ... they say ..." And so it had gone on. Jesus of Nazareth passing by. And the crowds gathering round Him in this village street, and He began to talk to them, and they fell silent. Then, suddenly, there was a movement at the edge of the crowd. A young man pushed his way through, his eyes on the speaker, until he was standing right in front of Jesus. "Good Master, what shall I *do* to inherit eternal life? And what he really meant was "What shall I do about my religion?" And the answer: "You know all the commandments: do not kill: do not steal: do not commit adultery, and so forth. Keep these and you shall live." It is almost like hearing the sigh, watching the disillusionment on the young man's face ... "But, Master, *I've done all this* ever since I was a kid. And it is just no use. My religion's gone dead on me. It doesn't make sense. It has no real connection with my daily life. It may be all right for the scribes and the Pharisees—this stuff about the Law—but

what can I do? How can I really serve God? What's missing in my religion?" ... And then the answer to all this, swiftly, sternly and without any gloss, "Go. Sell up everything you've got and give it to the poor. And come ... follow Me." The rich young ruler, whose name we do not know, had his answer. "Go ... Sell ... Follow" and "he went away sorrowful, for he was very rich".

Quite an ordinary incident, when you look at it dispassionately. One would think it must have happened many times. A questioner disappointed by the answer to his question! A young man, full of enthusiasm, put out of countenance because his enthusiasm has led him to ask more than he meant to ask! Whichever we choose to look at the incident, it doesn't *seem* very remarkable, does it? The sort of thing that might happen in any village street when Jesus was there.

There was something special.

"Jesus, looking upon him, loved him ..." Loved him, no doubt, because he was young and fresh and unsullied by the world. Jesus loved him, and, one would guess, with a specially hopeful love: a love that could rightly expect a generous response. But instead. "He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

And Jesus let him go!

That's the point! Don't you see? "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him" but He let him go. He didn't run after him, or argue with him or explain that the cost of discipleship would have its compensations. He did not, even for a moment, try to capture his allegiance. He simply let him go.

Man is *always free* to choose: because love must itself always be free. Christ cannot compel the allegiance of any

man. Neither does He try to do so. But if you hear His voice: and if you recognize in it the voice of Truth: and if you *then* turn away from it, knowing what you do; do not be surprised if, like the rich young ruler with the eyes of the Son of God upon him, you go away "*sorrowful*".

V

THE ELDER BROTHER

I SUPPOSE that if you were asked which, of all the parables in the Gospel, is the most familiar, you would answer "The Prodigal Son". In fact, it is so familiar that phrases from it have become part of our conversation and have no reference to the story itself. We "kill the fatted calf", we talk about "the return of the prodigal", and so forth. Isn't it rather strange, therefore, that we almost forget the fact that, in the parable, there was an Elder Brother? He is, like those other figures in the real-life events of the Gospel story, anonymous: brief in his appearance: true to type in an astonishing way, and wholly necessary to the parable itself. Yet we don't think about him very much. I wonder if it is because he is so like, so very like, ourselves?

Across the fields in the evening twilight after a hard day's work on the farm. And he was coming back to what he *knew*: security, comfort, the ease of his own fireside. He wanted the routine of welcome and food and sleep after toil. The path he trod: the gates he opened and shut: the pattern of the stars above his head—all these were *familiar*. And, there, the house itself, which would soon be his—that was familiar too. And he loved it.

But that evening, as he neared the house, he got a sudden shock. The windows were open and the sound of music, the blaze of light. It was all so unusual that he didn't go to the front door: he had to find out first what had happened and give himself time for adjustment. There was an explanation. "Haven't you heard? Your brother's home again. Came in

this morning, hardly recognisable so thin and unkempt and old-looking. Had scarcely a rag on his back! But your father! Why—as soon as he saw him on the road, ran out to meet him and flung his arms round him and brought him home. He just couldn't wait for anything ... And that's the reason for all this noise and laughter: it's a feast for your brother's homecoming: they've killed a fatted calf ..."

"And he was angry and would not go in". And even when his father came out to plead with him, he turned on him with a fierceness he did not know he had in his heart. "All these years, I've slaved and toiled and sweated for you! All these years, I've kept the farm going and made it prosper! All these years, I've given of my best to this place and have hardly taken a holiday so that it would be cared for! And this young wastrel of a brother—what has he done? Squandered every penny! Disgraced the family by his behaviour! Come home empty handed and dirty as any beggar! But never once—in all these long years—have you done anything like this for me!" "And he was angry and would not go in". And then, from his father's lips, "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine". I think these are among the most marvellous words in the whole of the Bible:—"Son, thou art ever with me: and all that I have is thine." They are words put into the mouth of the father in this parable: and the father is God Himself. God Himself, looking down on us men—the Prodigals, speaking, not two thousand years ago to a fiction character: but NOW to you and me:

"All that I have is thine". Inconceivable, isn't it? When we remember who says it—and to whom! "All that I have is thine". So wonderful that it takes your breath away if you really think about it. Can it be true? It can: and it is.—"Herein is Love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us". And the heavenly life begins here and now in our response to that infinite, changeless and eternal love.

VI

THE WOMAN WITH THE ISSUE OF BLOOD

DO you like being one of a crowd? "A consumer", "the listener", "the viewer" just "one of the people". That's what they think of us. We are the object behind man's production of mass entertainment: whether it is in advertising or planning—we're part of the modern world. And so it is dangerously easy, when we come to read the gospel to imagine that Jesus Christ could not possibly understand us. After all, what could a small rural peasant country have in common with the industrialized society of today? And could anyone—even Christ—associating with simple peasants and shepherds and village craftsmen, understand the problems of such a complex technological social order as our own? Where is the point of contact? Well—whatever Christ knew or did not know of our way of life, it is absolutely certain that He *did* know a lot about crowds, people in the mass, the impersonal anonymous multitude. Again and again, we are told the same thing:—Five thousand walked round the lake to hear Him. "Much people followed Him" and "He had compassion on them ..." for their weariness and their hunger. (Individuals could not come near Him).

"You see the multitude thronging you ..." he was told. And on that occasion, it was almost possible to see the way they moved, getting in His way, hindering Him as He tried to pass down the narrow village streets. And it was important that He should move fast—for He'd been called by Jairus: urgently because his daughter was dangerously ill.

And so He went. And the crowd got word of it and started to follow. Rumour passed from one to another very quickly, "The healer's coming! Perhaps there'll be another miracle! Perhaps we shall see how He does it!" And so they pressed round Him, thronging Him, jostling Him, hindering Him—as they often did. A crowd like any other crowd: its chief quality—a determined selfishness.

Then, suddenly, He stopped. Slowly He turned round. Silence fell. "Who touched Me?" What a fantastic question! With that eager bustling mob all round Him! With men and women so close to Him that He can hardly move! Someone burst out: "You can see the multitude thronging you—How can you possibly ask 'who touched You?' " And then a woman, trembling with shame and fear, with the lines of suffering clear upon her face, knelt before Him and poured out her story. Twelve years of sickness. Twelve years of fading hope, cure after cure proved useless. Twelve years of ritual uncleanness, separation from common worship. And then: "Daughter, Go in peace! thy faith hath made thee whole."

What a lot this single incident tells us—He was there, in the crowd. Right in the heart of it. Knowing at first hand its restless, inquisitive, sensation-hungry nature. He didn't stand outside, so to speak, and look on at the world. He *entered* it. Came into it.

He knew in the crowd there is *one*: just one! "A woman", with no name for history to remember her by, and with a sickness upon her and a fear and loneliness in her heart. Lonely as only those in a crowd can be. And all she did was furtively to finger the fringe of his dress. "If I may touch the hem of His garment ...". And so it was. The Son of God stopped for *one*, because in all that seeking crowd, He knows that one was in need of Him. This is our GOD.

And what a moment for her to choose! The least convenient moment, one might think, of all. For He was on His

way to someone in even greater need: a dying child. Yet still—He stopped. Unhurried, quiet. He turned to this other woman and calmed her fear, reassuring her, giving her what nobody else could give in twelve long years—not only healing of body, but peace. This is our GOD.

“Go in peace, thy faith hath made thee whole.” This is our God, the same Christ, now risen and triumphant. No crowd can separate us from Him, no single moment, however charged with urgency. But we must stretch out our hand, and touch!

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