

THE ESSENCE OF GREATNESS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 4, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

We live in a day of great names, great fame, great power, great prestige, and great wealth. It is good for us to pause occasionally and remember that none of these things is very important in the Lord's sight. We live in a day when a young man because of his ability to sing can almost overnight become known throughout the whole world. Similarly there are those who find themselves in positions of great influence and power in the business or industrial world. Even more obviously prominent political figures becomes known throughout the earth. Through newspapers, radio and television, it is possible for people to become very great and yet be very little inside. In our day we need to realize more than in many other generations that greatness in the real sense is determined by what is inside of a person.

I have opened the Bible to that interesting story in I Samuel 16 where Samuel was guided in the selection of Israel's next king. He looked upon the height and the outward appearance of Eliab, the oldest son of Jesse, and said, "Surely Jehovah's anointed is before him. But Jehovah said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him: for Jehovah seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but Jehovah looketh upon the heart." (I Sam. 16:6-7).

In this day of great stress and strain there are a great many breakdowns. Sometimes these breakdowns are in homes. We are told that one out of every four homes will break eventually in divorce. Sometimes these breakdowns are within the individual himself. This is a day of increasing mental illness. It is also a day of moral and religious breakdown.

A great deal of this tragedy comes as we rush madly for bigness, for wealth, for power and for importance. In this rush modern man has often neglected the simple virtues that have always meant success. These are homely little virtues. They do not spread very well across a newspaper's front page, and yet these are the things that our God appreciates. If you and I are to live lives that have stability and strength and happiness, if our great nation is to remain strong, and if our world is to continue, we will have to go back to these simple virtues that are not spectacular but are the marks of real greatness.

A Great Story

It is in this context that I want to tell you a story. It is a very simple story and it is a very old story. It occurred among some peasant people in a little country that was hardly known then and is hardly known now. It happened approximately 1,000 years before Christ. What chance did these peasant people, on the backside of the world, and a thousand years before Christ have to do anything that would live, anything very important? Yet in God's sight what they did, though humble and unnoticed perhaps in their own day, was so important that he recorded it for all times. I do not know whether you and I will live to see the end of time, but whenever the end of time comes this story will still be read by men and women all around the world. God will still be recommending in his book this little story because it has in it the grounds of eternal greatness.

"And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem-Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem-Judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there. And Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelt there about ten years. And Mahlon and Chilion died both of them; and the woman was left of her two children and of her husband. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that Jehovah had visited his people in giving them bread. And she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah. And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house: Jehovah deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me. Jehovah grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voice, and wept. And they said unto her, Nay, but we will return with thee unto thy people. And Naomi said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn again, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say, I have hope, if I should even have a husband to-night, and should also bear sons; would ye therefore tarry till they were grown? would ye therefore stay from having husbands? nay, my daughters, for it grieveth me much for your sakes, for the hand of Jehovah is gone forth against me. And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clave unto her. And she said, Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her god: return thou after thy sister-in-law. And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, and 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: Jehovah do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me. And when she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her. So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem ..." (Ruth 1:1-19).

Peasants ... Refugees

These were peasant people. If you and I were describing them in modern terminology we would say that they were displaced persons. We would even say that they were migratory workers. You might even say that these people were refugees, refugees from famine. Then, where did they go? Moab. Of all places, for Moab was over back of the Dead Sea, and had never been known for anything important. Yet there was something in these people. What was it? The essence of this story is that in the lives of these, as we would say, unimportant people there was a pure, tender love for each other that made them great.

Here was a mother-in-law situation. There was the possibility that Naomi would dominate her sons too much and the daughters-in-law might think of her as a rival for their love, or she might try to dominate the daughters and tell them how to live. Then, too, she was a foreigner. But somehow, while those are real barriers, they did not apply in this case. Naomi had a love for her daughters-in-law that melted those barriers. When tragedy struck and her husband was taken and then a little later when tragedy struck again and her boys died, the daughters-in-law drew near to their mother-in-law. There was a love on her part that melted any estrangement that might have come.

It was not her wealth that they were after, obviously. She did not have a fine house; she did not have an inheritance; she was alone in a strange land. She had nothing, except that she loved them. But that love was so powerful that when she said, "I believe I will go home to my own people in Bethlehem," both girls said, "We will go with you." They wept; they kissed her. Then came that eloquent, pleading speech, "No, don't go with me; you go back; stay with your own people. Go to your mother's home. You will have another husband in time. You are young, your life is still ahead of you." Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, wept again and then turned back. But Ruth did not turn back.

Immortal Words

Do you see that dusty road? There was no pavement. Do you see little hovels for houses? That was all they had. Yet something was said on that dusty road and in that unimpressive setting that lives even yet. Sometimes when a couple in the 20th century is ready to get married in a formal church wedding, the bride will say, "If you don't mind, I would like to include in the ceremony those beautiful words of Ruth." Then, when it is time for the wedding and all the candles are lighted, all the decorations are in place, the audience has come, and the bride and bridegroom are there, we listen as those beautiful words from a peasant girl in the long ago fill the room and fill our hearts. The bride says to her husband, "Entreat me not to leave thee, and 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; Jehovah do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

Ruth returned the love that Naomi had given to her, and so she left her own land, her own people, her own God and went with her mother-in-law. In the second chapter, the twelfth verse, reads, "Jehovah recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of Jehovah, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to take refuge." Yes, Ruth had come to take refuge under the wings of Jehovah. Here is something that jumps out at you. Naomi by her example had brought someone who did not really know Jehovah, under Jehovah's influence. Write the name of Jehovah down as a missionary. Naomi brought someone to God.

The rest of the story is an impressive one, but not for our study on this occasion. God blessed Naomi and Ruth when they got to Bethlehem. Ruth was guided to Boaz and he performed the right of a kinsman, marrying her. In time they had a son. When you and I memorize the genealogy of Jesus there that son is Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed (son of Ruth), Jesse, David. A Moabitish girl thus has her name inscribed in the opening chapter of Matthew as being one of those who played a part in the lineage of Jesus.

The Real Secret

Does your home need what this home had? Tender, pure love among the members of the family! Does your life need the same emphasis? Love is the central theme of our religion, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." (John 3:16). That is the way it all began. Then Paul wrote, "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:5-8). That is Christ's love.

The greatest of all commandments is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Mark 12:30-31). We can fly in astrojets, but if we do not have love, we do not count. We can be worth millions, but if we do not have love, this simple, old-fashioned, eternal virtue, our lives are useless. So, let us slow the pace a little and let us emphasize the important things. Let us love God; love our fellowmen. If we really love our wives and our children and our in-laws, we will have less tension and fewer problems.

Is this not a great story? Does it not make you want to let love flow out of your life into other lives? We must begin by loving God and showing that love by being real Christians. Christ said, "If ye love me ye will keep my commandments." (John 14:15).