

observance. But we can't reduce the teaching of Jesus to a formula; that reduces it to head-knowledge. To change the world around us starts with our hearts being changed – we can't give what we haven't got.

QUESTION *How can we, as God's people, show God's transforming love to the world more effectively?*

Hebrews 9:11-14 – The power of Christ's love is in His shed blood

Unlike the blood of calves and goats, Christ's sacrifice changes us inwardly

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation.

"Greater... perfect tabernacle" — a comparison between the former tabernacle with its hammered gold seven-fold lamp and consecrated bread forming a 'heavenly tent' around God's presence; and where Christ took up His high priestly seat.

12-13 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for

all by His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

"Once for all" — each Levitical priest's repeated sacrifice was a partial remedy for sin; Christ's sinless sacrifice was final, effective and unrepeatable.

14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

"How much more" — emphasising the power of remembering and declaring what Christ's blood has done for us, shared by all Christian traditions.

SUMMARY Coming to Christ and finding a personal relationship with God invites the Holy Spirit's power to change our self-centred flesh nature on the basis of the work of the blood of Christ. This brings spiritual forgiveness for sin, and also emotional release from the effect of sin.

APPLICATION The flesh nature — how we behave naturally as human kind — is selfish and self protective. But now we can choose to think and act differently, with a generosity of spirit towards others. Reminded of how Christ's blood has cleansed us, we can reflect God's love and generous spirit to us, in the way we relate to others.

QUESTION *Christ's blood is all-powerful and effective, but how do we assert this?*

PRAYER Father, we see selfishness, hatred and war all around us.

Yet You sent Jesus to be the embodiment of Your way of love, and the means to achieve it.

Fill us with Your love and empower us to use it — to bring change to the bit of the world we can influence. Amen.

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PRINT EDITION

Bible readings for Sunday, October 31, 2021 + commentary & references

Non-denominational Bible study for **October 31** (Revised Common Lectionary readings)

Prepare by reading the Bible passages beforehand — read again to reflect on the pulpit teaching

Theme: **True worship is to love God and to love others**

Deut. 6:1-9, Ruth 1:1-18 — Choose to love God first and foremost

Mark 12:28-34 — The Great Commandment, love God, love others

Hebrews 9:11-14 — The power of Christ's love is in His shed blood

And also read: Psalm 146

Deut. 6:1-9, Ruth 1:1-18 — Choose to love God first and foremost

Putting God first and giving others His love and faithfulness is worship

1-2 These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all His decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

"Fear the Lord your God" — includes the sense of 'revere' Him for His goodness. What follows is predicated on Israel's covenanted relationship with a compassionate and gracious God of love, faithfulness, and forgiveness, Exodus 34:5-7.

3 Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

"Be careful to obey" — in terms of the heart and passion of v.5; see note to vv.6-8.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

"The Lord is one" — distinct from other nations whose worship involved placating various deities related to life's threats. Scripture is progressive revelation, and "The Lord is one" remains a truth over God revealing Himself in His Son, and the Holy Spirit of God, guiding and empowering the Early Church and mission today.

5 Love the Lord your God with all your

heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

"Hear, O Israel" — recited by observant Jews daily and in the synagogue, this Shema (Hebrew for 'hear') passage is a foundational confession of faith.

"Love the Lord" — in a broad range of meanings, the sense of 'adore, revere, be committed to'.

6-8 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

"On your hearts... foreheads" — some Jewish sects took this literally, missing the point. Creating rules and routines is easier to maintain than a faith and heart relationship. But the Lord simply wants our hearts, and that will be evident enough.

9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Ruth and Naomi: a courageous choice to care and rely on God's provision

Ruth 1:1-2 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The

man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

"When the judges ruled" — after Joshua and before Saul and David.

"Ephrathites" — the region. Micah foretold the Saviour's birth in Bethlehem Ephratha.

"Mahlon and Kilion — names descriptive of weak constitution.

3-5 Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

"Married Moabite women" — although outsiders, not forbidden; marriage and continuation of the family line was socially essential.

"Naomi was left" — the story brings out the plight of Ruth's mother-in-law, an unsupported widow.

6-7 When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

"The Lord had come to the aid of His people" — in many places this story emphasises the Lord's sovereignty over events.

8-9 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

"May the Lord show you kindness" — Naomi had blessed her daughters-in-law with *hesed*, God's covenant love, although the daughters-in-law were not Israelites and in a foreign country.

9-10 Then she kissed them goodbye

and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

11-13 But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!"

"Turned against me" — Naomi sees her difficult circumstances in the wrong light, but this book brings out God's gracious provision.

14 At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

"Clung to her" — *dabaq*, a strong word, also used of a man being joined to his wife, Genesis 2:24, or remaining faithful to the Lord, Deut 4:4, Joshua 10:20; Josh 22:5.

15 "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

16 But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God.

"Your God, my God" — Ruth had probably learned to worship the Moabite god Chemosh.

17-18 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realised that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

"May the Lord" — Ruth invokes the name of Yahweh for the first time, showing her commitment to Naomi and the Lord, with no other prospects. She is embracing uncertainty, to go where she has no family and friends, as an outsider.

SUMMARY Ruth and Naomi faced an uncertain future as women in a man's world, their menfolk having been taken from them. Do they blame God, or put Him first? Do they do what gives them most opportunity, or choose to do what honours God?

APPLICATION Life and its pressures hasn't changed in three thousand years, except that we are used to having options, and unused to seeking God's best and trusting Him in it. Rather than going for easy but low-value choices, we need to work up the skills for seeking high-value and lasting ones — loving God by trusting Him for His way.

QUESTION *Trusting God in how we make choices is difficult. Who can share this with you, and encourage you?*

Mark 12:28-34 – The Great Commandment, love God, love others

Unselfishness is a stand-out guiding principle of the kingdom of God

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"One of the teachers of the law" — generally hostile, this seems to have been a teachable one.

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

"The most important..." — having turned the law into a code of 613 statutes, rabbis argued which were more or less 'weighty'. Jesus starts with their debate, quoting the familiar 'Shema' passage which opens worship in synagogues today.

31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"The second is this" — Jesus puts together two sayings widely separated in the law; combining them was unexpected. The first summarises commandments 1-4 about wholeheartedly loving

God; the second, commandments 5-10 about moral responsibility and how we treat others. His point is that they cannot be separated.

32-33 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but Him. To love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

"You are right" — this particular scribe had seen that God required just and merciful behaviour, without which the ceremonial was meaningless.

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask Him any more questions.

"Not far from the kingdom" — the scribe had the right priorities, but to enter the kingdom would need to recognise and speak out the reality of the Son of God, who would shortly die in his place as a sacrifice for his sins.

• *For further study* of how the Great Commandment unfolds, Deut. 6:46; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43; Matthew 22:36-40; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14.

SUMMARY This man knew God's priorities — a lack of moral compass and concern for others cancels out any performing of religious intentions. God wants us to return His love by putting Him first and showing His love to others. The second teaching here is about the spirit, rather than the letter, of the law — living by God's love.

APPLICATION The Jewish teachers and scribes made much of the details of