

“Offstage”

Reading: Ruth 1:1-18; 4:13-17

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

In June of 1917, the massive armies of the Allies and the Germans were locked facing one another a matter of mere yards apart in a great line of misery and death that stretched across the middle of Europe. It seemed that they could only shift one another slowly, slightly, and at huge cost of life. And so they lined up in their trenches and died by the thousands. Suddenly, shortly after three o'clock on the morning of June 7, 600 tons of explosives buried a hundred feet beneath the German trenches on the Messines Ridge in Belgium exploded, instantly killing 10,000 men in the largest and deadliest planned explosion the world had ever seen or would see until the advent of nuclear weapons. It was so loud that the sound was reported in Dublin, Ireland, 500 miles away. For the last eighteen months, the British had been digging a series of 21 mines directly beneath the Germans and filling them with explosives as the linchpin in their latest offensive. The attack was a rare success; the surviving Germans were too stunned to mount a defense against the Allies that day.

The Germans had been digging mines of their own; they were familiar with the tactic of mining beneath trenches, and when their mines met their enemies' mines, brutal hand-to-hand battles took place deep in the earth. They knew that the British were digging mines, but they did not see what was happening until it was too late. When we think of World War I, we probably picture men fighting in trenches and no man's land, with a few biplanes flying overhead and artillery shells raining poison gas down. Maybe we think of the advent of tank warfare and machine guns, the beginning of the modern age of war. We picture the sorts of things that took place on the main stage of World War I. But on that day in June, 1917, what decided the fates of tens of thousands of men happened offstage, deep in the ground, where only a few were watching.

The Battle of Messines is hardly the only example in wartime when a battle was won or lost because of planning and events that took place off of, or in this case, underneath, the main stage of battle. When we study history and world events, we tend to focus on the big picture events: the wars, the great world leaders, the massive social upheavals. And those events are of course important; no one's going to deny that World War I wasn't important. But we dare not discount the importance of the little things, the things that take place off the grand stage of world events, the things that happen in everyday peoples' lives, the things that don't interest historians. The truth is that big events are just a collection of small events, and when we look more closely at big events and big news stories, we often find that they're much more complex than can be explained in a two-minute news report or a paragraph of a textbook.

Consider the Second World War, that terrible contest between fascism and the unlikely alliance of democracy and communism. Our history books would focus on the battles and the political wranglings of our world leaders. The History Channel might take the time to get into the details of the battles to explain key events, like the mines in the Battle of Messines in World War I. But the little village of Le Chambon in south central France would certainly not be on the main stage of World War II. No great battles were fought there, and no negotiations or treaties were discussed there. But under the leadership of two pastors in the town, named Andre Trocme and Edouard Theis, the people of Le Chambon saved three to five thousand Jews fleeing the Nazis. In spite of arrests and threats and even some violence by the French authorities, Le Chambon sheltered Jews and helped them escape

the country throughout the war. It was the first town to be collectively awarded the Righteous Among the Nations award, which recognizes those non-Jews who risked themselves to save Jews during the Holocaust.

The big events happening on the main stage are important, of course. But were the events in Le Chambon important? Did one little village's nonviolent resistance to the atrocities of Nazi Germany, events that are rarely noticed or remembered, matter in the grand scheme of things? Absolutely. Thousands of people were spared a horrific death in an extermination camp because that little town, far from the main stage of the war, decided to do what had to be done, even though no one seemed to be paying attention. The main stage is important. It's where the story is played out for all to see. But that does not mean that the things that happen offstage are not important.

When I was in high school I was often involved in school plays on the technical side of things, and I especially enjoyed working with the stage lighting. From that vantage point I could see pretty much the whole production from casting to the final curtain call, and from there it was abundantly clear that what happened offstage definitely mattered, and it even affected what happened on the main stage sometimes. I remember one person who was a bit of a diva offstage, and she was a bit of a diva when she was on stage, too. If someone didn't prepare offstage, it showed onstage. If there was tension offstage, there was tension onstage. If you have a difficult audience offstage, it makes it harder for things to go well onstage. We focus our attention on what's happening onstage, on the big things in life, but we dare not neglect the little things offstage.

Our chapter of *The Story* shifts our focus offstage for this week. Last Sunday we told tales of epic heroes and great battles, stories for the ages, grand strategies and gods in combat. We focused on the book of Judges, which tells of a period in the story of God's work with humanity in which God has brought a nation of people into a land where they can live as His redeemed people, His nation bought back from slavery, His family adopted out of the ruin of creation. It should have been a little glimpse of the Garden of Eden, but it wasn't, because the people kept doing what was right in their own eyes rather than living in the sight of God. And the results were truly horrible; there was rape and murder and civil war, and because they kept rejecting God as their king, God kept withdrawing His protection from them. Nation after nation took advantage of their weakness and oppressed them until the people cried out and God raised up a Judge to lead them to freedom again. That was happening on the main stage in this period of God's story with His people.

But then we turn the page and come to a very different sort of story. We learn from the very beginning that it takes place during the same period; while the Judges were ruling on the main stage of Israelite history, offstage there was a very small, very insignificant, very normal story taking place. It's just the story of one little family and their troubles during this time. They're not wealthy or powerful or grand, and in fact very soon they're not even in the land of Israel. Because of a famine they emigrate to Moab, a neighboring country, and of course the God of Israel doesn't really care what happens outside His borders (so the thinking might go). But this offstage story, out of the limelight, quickly becomes a beautiful story about faithfulness, as beautiful as the book of Judges is ugly.

The matriarch of this family, Naomi, is eventually the only one surviving in her family except for her two daughters-in-law, who are also widows, and both of whom are from the land of Moab. In

that culture, without a husband or a male heir Naomi would have nothing but a short, miserable life of destitution to look forward to. Her daughter-in-law Ruth makes a beautiful statement of commitment and faithfulness to Naomi, promising to go with her and take care of her, even though Ruth could have stayed in her homeland and married someone else and continued on with her life. Naomi returns to Israel with Ruth accompanying her, and through a sequence of events they encounter Boaz, who was a close relative of Naomi and would therefore, in that culture, have the opportunity to pay off her debts and rescue, or redeem, her from her poverty. They had a specific name for it: he could be her kinsman-redeemer.

We read the end of this short love story: Boaz falls in love with Ruth and marries her, and in so doing both Ruth and Naomi are provided for and blessed. And Ruth soon becomes pregnant with a son, which in that context is pretty much the equivalent of saying “and they lived happily ever after.” But then we get a little postscript, an addendum of sorts, and if we have a sense of the bigger picture of God’s story, the pieces start to come together. We learn at the very end that Ruth, this woman who is not even an Israelite and shouldn’t even be included in the story of God’s people, is in fact the great grandmother of David, the greatest king in Israel’s history.

This story is meant to be read alongside last week’s story, I think. The books of Judges and Ruth are parallel books: one is dark, brutal, and depressing, while the other is beautiful, tender, and hopeful. One reveals the persistent evil that resides in the hearts of humans apart from God, while the other points us to God’s planning for our future, planning that goes so far beyond the requirements of faithfulness. But most of all for us today, these two stories held side by side show us that we know a God who is big enough to handle what’s happening on the main stage — He can raise up Judges and fight for His family to save them in great, sweeping battles — but our God is not so big that He cannot see the small things, the things happening offstage — He provides for one little family in their poverty, and through them He plans blessing for future generations.

Our God is big enough to handle events on a planetary stage, but He is not so big that He cannot take care of events offstage in the lives of people like you and me. We want God to do mighty acts of salvation that will echo through eternity, yes, but we also need Him to do small acts of salvation in our small lives. Perhaps you have a desire in your life to do great things for God on the main stage of the world, and that is commendable, but if you cannot do faithful small things offstage first, you will not do great things for God elsewhere. This is one of the principles we see Jesus preaching about: His kingdom is a kingdom of small things offstage, small people, small actions, small thoughts. He cares about small people, and He often chooses them specifically for His purposes. He cares about small actions, and He knows our small thoughts, because they matter to Him. Great things are made up of lots of small things; if we cannot be faithful in the small things, we will not be faithful in the big ones.

Our God is big enough to take care of the events on the main stage, but He is not so big that He cannot see what happens offstage, too. He puts entire continents in their places, but He can also put your life in order. He cares about the fate of nations, but He also cares about our little choices every day to be faithful to Him or not. And in fact, as we see with the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, it is often those little choices made offstage that determine the shape of God’s kingdom in the future.

He is big enough that He cares about our entire world, but He also cares about your life and your circumstances and your hurts, too. Your choices matter to Him. Your faithfulness, day in and day out, in big things and small things, is what He desires. If you think your life is so far from the main event that it doesn't matter, that God doesn't care, that God doesn't notice, remember Ruth.



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