

Lessons from the Life of Ruth

The Bible book of Ruth tells about God's dealings with one family in Israel during the time of the Judges. The little book of four chapters and 85 verses is named for Ruth, but a large part of the story is about the desperate plight of Naomi. Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law, became an important link in God's larger purpose to bless all nations. Ruth was a non-Israelite who became an ancestor of King David, and thus also of the Messiah born in Bethlehem.

The period of the judges was the time when "there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). This was one of the lowest points in Israel's history. The era was marked by cruelty and lust and greed, and gross violence, and immorality. There were turmoil and disunity in the land. There are accounts of stealing idols, of grisly murders, and of tribal civil wars. The people of Israel were worshipping the gods of the Canaanite tribes, and they "provoked the Lord to anger" (Judges 2:11-12).

The book of Ruth shows a different side of the dark period of the Judges. In spite of the wickedness and the prevailing apostasy in Israel at the time of the Judges, there were some individuals with wholesome convictions, and some who were living godly lives. God had a faithful remnant in the land even in those dark days of apostasy.

The book of Ruth is the account of a Jewish family (Elimelech and his wife Naomi, and their two sons)—a family from Bethlehem, who left the Promised Land to dwell in Moab. One of the sons married Ruth (a Moabite girl), only to later die and leave her a widow. The other son also married a Moabite girl (Orpah), and he later died too (Ruth 1:5). When Naomi decided to go back to Bethlehem some years later, Ruth (the Moabite girl) decided to go with her. Orpah stayed in Moab. Through a providential chain of events, Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David. Note three major themes in the book.

1. Ruth Choosing (Ruth 1:1-22)

There was a famine in Bethlehem, where Naomi and Elimelech lived, and so they decided to move to Moab. The move to Moab, a country which lies east of the Dead Sea, involved a journey of 60 to 70 miles into a pagan territory. The Moabites were descendants of Lot by incest (described in Genesis 19:30-38).

The Moabites were enemies of Israel, and thus Elimelech and Naomi may have found the reception over in Moab to be less than friendly. The animosity between the Moabites and the Israelites stretched way back to the time of Balaam, when Balak (the king of Moab) hired Balaam to curse Israel. So it likely was not easy being an Israelite in the strange land of Moab.

When I was in elementary school, some refugees from Europe moved into our area. It was awkward for them, wearing lumpy stockings, and strange caps, and unable to speak English. Some students tended to stare and smile, and make unkind remarks. To move into a strange land with a different culture, certainly was not an easy task.

Verse 3 explains that sometime after Elimelech and Naomi arrived in Moab, tragedy struck their family. Elimelech died, and Naomi was left to depend on her two sons for sustenance. She became a widow and experienced the grief that accompanies the death of a spouse.

Verse 4 explains that her two sons each married a Moabite woman. Naomi likely knew that relationships between the Israelites and the Moabites were discouraged, yet Naomi accepted the two Moabite daughters-in-law, and in fact, truly loved them. Naomi did not let trifling differences in the way these girls (from a different culture) did things destroy their relationship. And they responded with love to Naomi.

Verse 5 tells how Naomi's burden was increased further with the death of her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Now Naomi had no husband or sons to provide for her. That made the situation very desperate for Naomi.

In some way, Naomi learned that the famine in Bethlehem had ended and that the Lord "had visited his people in giving them bread" (verse 6b). And so Naomi made the courageous decision to return to Bethlehem (v.7). There were many risks involved in making the journey across the miles of barren desert. There was the possibility of heat exhaustion, starvation, attacks by bandits, and danger from wild animals. Yet, in the ancient world, widows had no means of support and were stricken with poverty. So Naomi decided to return to her homeland and make the best of it.

In verse 8 Naomi encouraged her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab, and to marry again. To find "rest" in the house of a husband (v.9) was a reference to marriage. Naomi pronounced a blessing on the two women, and most likely assumed that she would continue the journey to Bethlehem alone.

In verse 10, both girls declared their intention to continue on with Naomi. Naomi's love had made a deep impact on their lives. However, Orpah finally gave in to Naomi's suggestion, and turned to go home. This decision should not necessarily be looked upon as a reproach on Orpah's character. She was obeying the wishes of her mother-in-law. Nothing more is said about Orpah.

Ruth, however, burst forth in a heartfelt statement of commitment and loyalty and chose to go along and live in Israel with Naomi. One writer says that Naomi was a *grieving* widow, Orpah was a *leaving* widow, and Ruth was a *cleaving* widow.

The devotion expressed by Ruth in the words of verse 16 comprises one of the most touching passages in all of human literature. Ruth said to Naomi: "*Entreat me not to leave 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.*" It is obvious that Ruth esteemed her mother-in-law very highly.

Ruth's decision to accompany her mother-in-law was not only a decision to go with Naomi; it was also a decision for the true God. Ruth said, "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God shall be my God." The Moabites worshiped the chief god Chemosh. Worshiping Chemosh included child-sacrifice, and mutilating the human body in rituals for the dead. Ruth turned her back on her pagan Moabite ancestry, and became a faithful worshiper of the Lord God of Israel.

Naomi realized that Ruth was sincere in her decision to leave Moab and to serve the true God, and so she quit trying to persuade the younger woman to stay in Moab. The two women likely had conversation as they walked the 60-plus miles west to the land of Israel. They had to descend 4,500 feet from the mountains of Moab into the Jordan Valley, and then had to ascend to Bethlehem, which lies more than 3,700 feet above the level of the Dead Sea.

The remaining verses of chapter 1 indicate that the arrival of Naomi and Ruth in Bethlehem caused a kind of commotion. The bustle was undoubtedly the joy of seeing Naomi again after all her years away from the community. Naomi had gone out “full” (verse 21), that is, with her husband and sons. She returned “empty,” that is, a widow and childless.

2. Ruth Serving (Ruth 2:1-23)

It was the month of April—the time of barley harvest. The winter was over; spring had arrived; the time had come for the singing of birds. God was working behind the scenes. Through His providence, He was moving to act with favor toward both widows. There was hope!

Life was not easy in early times for widows living in the Mideast. Hard work and poverty were often the lot of those who were without a male provider. But the law in Israel provided that farmers were not to strip the fields clean when harvesting. Some of the grain was to be left standing so that the fatherless and widows and other needy persons could gather the gleanings. Ruth decided to take advantage of this law by going out to the barley fields to gather up some of the gleanings.

Boaz (verse 1) was a wealthy close relative of Elimelech, Ruth’s deceased father-in-law. He was a man of outstanding qualities—a man of valor, capable, efficient, and living an exemplary life. In Israelite society, such a male relative was responsible to care for his extended family, especially if family members were orphans or widows.

Verse 2 explains a mark of Ruth’s beautiful character. She learned about the regulation in the Law of Moses that required land owners to permit the poor to freely glean in their fields. Ruth spoke to Naomi, and offered to go and glean in the fields in order to provide food for both of them. Ruth’s willingness to go and work in the fields shows her sacrifice and unselfish care for Naomi. To “glean” meant to pick up the grain which the reapers left on purpose for the poor, as provided in the Law (Leviticus 19:9).

The economic plan for Israel’s poor did not include government handouts. In fact, there was no centralized government in Ruth’s day (the time of the Judges). However, farmers were to let the corners of their fields unharvested, so that the poor could gather food for their needs. The reminder in verse 2 that Ruth was a “Moabitess,” emphasized her status as a foreigner, and also the kindness of Boaz to a person who was not a native Israelite.

Verse 3 indicates that when Ruth set out to glean, she was led to a field owned by Boaz. The text says she “happened” to “light on” his field, but surely it was not by chance, but by divine appointment. The fact that Boaz was related to Elimelech has important implications in the account of Ruth’s life, as the story unfolds. Ruth’s gleaning in the field owned by Boaz proved to be part of God’s plan for Ruth, and

for the household of Elimelech. When Boaz himself came out to the field that day to check the progress of the harvesting, he inquired about the Moabite girl, and was told that she worked hard all day, except for a few minutes rest in the house (Ruth 2:7).

The spiritual tone marking the relationship of Boaz with his workers was warm and vigorous. When Boaz greeted them with the blessing (“The Lord be with you”), they responded with a similar reply (“The Lord bless thee”). These words in Ruth 2:4 show that faith in Jehovah God was an active part of their lives.

When Boaz learned that the young woman was Naomi’s daughter-in-law (v.6), he cordially invited her to continue gleaning in the fields, and invited her to share the water which was provided for his workers (v.9). And when he addressed Ruth as “my daughter” (v.8), the reader is reminded of the difference in their ages. Boaz directed Ruth to stay close to the servant girls, who were binding the sheaves into bundles, after the reapers had cut the grain.

Verse 9 explains that Boaz had given orders to his young men not to molest Ruth. Boaz was promising to protect and provide for Ruth. He went “the second mile” to help and encourage the stranger from Moab. When Ruth expressed amazement that she, a foreigner, should be treated so generously (v.10), Boaz replied that he had been told about all her kindnesses shown to Naomi since the death of her husband, and that now she had left her own parents, and her native land, to come and dwell among strangers in Israel. Boaz was impressed by her loyalty to Naomi, and her sincere religious faith. He was delighted that she chose to abandon her own people, and to come and live with a people she had not previously known (v.11).

The dual blessing pronounced by Boaz (v.12) was a wish for fertility (an increase in the family), and for material prosperity. The prayer indicated that Boaz was deeply impressed by Ruth’s decision to take refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. The phrase “under whose wings thou art come to trust (for refuge)” was a figure of speech denoting God’s care for His people. Just as a mother bird protects her young by spreading her wings over them, so the Lord protects His people. This same figure is used in six of the Psalms and also in Matthew 23:37.

William Cushing was inspired by these words to write the hymn:

“Under His wings I am safely abiding;
Tho the night deepens and tempests are wild,
Still I can trust Him; I know He will keep me;
He has redeemed me, and I am His child.”

3. Ruth Rewarded (Ruth 3:1-4:17)

Much activity transpired in chapters 3 and 4. Ruth continued to glean throughout the barley and wheat harvest. In fact, when Ruth arrived home, she presented Naomi with a large container of barley, and Naomi knew at once *that God had been at work in Ruth’s life*. Ruth had gathered more than a normal

day's gleaning. Naomi interpreted the kindness of Boaz toward Ruth as an indication that he might be willing to do the part of a kinsman.

And so Naomi suggested that Ruth find a husband in Boaz, the kinsman of Elimelech (3:1-2). Since Naomi's husband and both her sons were dead, there was no one to carry on the family name. The family of Elimelech would be terminated unless the law of kinsman-redeemer could be applied.

The "kinsman-redeemer" (the Hebrew word "go-el") was the term used to describe a man who could redeem a troubled family by assuming several responsibilities. He could marry the childless widow of a deceased brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), buy back family land that had been sold to others (Leviticus 25:25), and look after needy and helpless members of the family (Leviticus 25:35). It is difficult to know how widely this law was observed, since Israel broke most of the laws God had given, but in Jeremiah 32 we learn that the law was still binding in the 600s B.C.

Chapter 3 tells how Naomi suggested a daring plan. Ruth was to go under the cover of night to the threshing floor, and propose marriage to Boaz. And so, according to a custom referred to in Ezekiel 16:8, after Boaz had finished his work and his evening meal, and retired for the night, guarding his harvest, Ruth went to the threshing floor and lay at his feet under a corner of his blanket. When Boaz awakened at midnight (Ruth 3:8), he was startled. However, instead of rebuking Ruth for asking him to act as her kinsman-redeemer, he blessed her and promised to make the proper arrangements the next morning.

All this may seem like irregular conduct to us, but actually it was the accepted practice in Israel, and there was nothing evil or suggestive about it. Ruth and Boaz both shine as bright examples of purity, faith, and responsible living.

The drama in the book of Ruth comes to its climax in the last verses of chapter 4. Verse 13 says that Boaz married Ruth and "the LORD gave her conception and she bare a son." The gift of life comes from God and begins at the moment of conception.

Verse 14 indicates that great happiness came to the family when Obed was born to Ruth and Boaz. It is difficult to put into words the joy that Naomi must have felt the first time she held Ruth's baby in her arms. Naomi looked upon the child as her own (verse 16), and the village women blessed the Lord for not leaving Naomi without a kinsman-redeemer.

In verse 15 the women of Bethlehem continued to pronounce blessings upon Naomi. To say that Ruth "loved" Naomi, and that she was "better than seven sons," was quite a tribute to Ruth. It is especially striking in light of the importance placed on "sons" in Old Testament times.

The story of Ruth, which began with famine, death, and mourning—ended with new life and rejoicing. The baby that came into the home of Boaz and Ruth was the means by which Ruth is listed in Matthew 1:5 as an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

There are some practical applications:

1) Naomi's consistent living was so impressive to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, that Ruth was willing to abandon her homeland and her gods. Ruth had observed Naomi's reactions as she experienced the death of her husband and the loss of her two sons—and she was impressed! Others notice how we handle the trials and difficulties of life. The Apostle James says that we should “count it all joy” (James 1:2) when the trials of life come our way. That is, we should experience (even in hard times) a deep sense of well-being that comes from knowing that God is in control, and that God uses both pain and pleasure to develop within us the character traits of endurance, patience, and reliance on Him.

2) Naomi at times was feeling unloved. She said in chapter 1:13, “The hand of the Lord is gone out (turned) against me.” But Naomi developed a sense of endurance, and throughout her trials she continued to trust in God. In the end, the Lord brought great blessings out of her desperate situation.

In this entire account God was close at hand, even though at times His presence seemed hidden. Yet the events flowed under His control and supervision. He controlled famine and harvest; He chose the destiny of individuals; He took the lead in bringing people together; He even guided in conception. Who could ever have imagined that the Lord would bring together a young Moabite woman and an older Israelite man, to become ancestors of king David, and finally of Jesus Christ? If God can do all that, He can also exercise His sovereignty and bring solutions to our difficult problems—and He can add new blessings to our lives.

3) In our society, there are lots of unfair negative jokes about mothers-in-law. It's true that sometimes mothers find it difficult to see the affection of their sons or daughters being transferred to someone else (at the time of their marriage), and a few mothers try to meddle in the affairs of their married children. That can lead to difficulties. But for the most part, mothers-in-law are great persons who want to do all they can to see their children's marriages succeed. And all who have living mothers-in-law should say to themselves, “This is the person who gave life to the one I love.” Ruth's love and care for her aging mother-in-law stands as a model for all generations.

-Harold S. Martin

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America