

The Story (8) – Ruth

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Introduction

Last week we looked at the Book of Judges. This morning we're looking at the Book of Ruth, the events of which took place "in the days when the Judges ruled." So it is sometime between Joshua's death around 1366 B.C. and Saul's being anointed king around 1051 B.C. Despite Israel's faithlessness during the time of the judges, we see in Ruth that God was using faithful people in his work to bless the nation and ultimately the world.

Book of Ruth

I. Tragedy Brings a Crisis (1:1-5)

A. In those days, a famine came on the land of Israel, which prompted Elimelech, an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah, to move to Moab with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Moab refers to the region east of the Dead Sea.

B. After Elimelech died, Naomi's two sons each took a Moabite wife; one was named Orpah and the other Ruth. A number of scholars believe the sons' marrying Moabite women was something improper that Naomi should have prevented. I do not think that is correct for reasons I cannot take the time to explain. You can get the details on this and some other issues from my online notes on Ruth at <http://theoutlet.us>.

C. Mahlon and Chilion both died without having had any children, leaving Elimelech's line on the verge of extinction and leaving Naomi without provision or protection.

1. As a childless, aging widow, she is in the worst possible position for an Israelite woman. The security and status that a husband and children afforded a woman in that culture and the blessing the children would be for her in her old age were gone.

2. You can feel Naomi's anguish in her description of her situation as "too bitter" in 1:13, in her statement in 1:20 that the Almighty had dealt "very bitterly" with her, and in her statement in 1:21 that she was "empty" and that the Almighty had brought "calamity" on her. I do not take these as sinful accusations against God but as the cry of an afflicted soul that, like Job, sees God behind her suffering and is convinced that she has done nothing worthy of such severe discipline.

II. The Return to Bethlehem (1:6-22)

A. Naomi and her daughters-in-law set out (1:6-7) – Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, with Orpah and Ruth following, because she had heard that the Lord had brought an

end to the famine that had driven her family to Moab in the first place. The three of them actually began the journey in v. 7.

B. Conversations en route (1:8-18) - At some point on the road, Naomi urged Orpah and Ruth to each return to her mother's house. She felt so targeted by God that she at that point had no hope regarding the future of any who cast their lot with her. Better to return to Moab than to follow this aging widow who, without God on her side, offered no hope of a new husband for her daughters-in-law and thus no hope for the blessing of family. She finally persuaded Orpah to turn back, but Ruth was adamant about remaining with her, so Naomi finally relented.

C. The arrival in Bethlehem (1:19-21)

1. Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest, which was in late April or early May. The women of the town asked, "Is this Naomi?" Perhaps this was merely an expression of surprise that she should return after being gone for so long, but it may also indicate how her suffering had worn on her physically.

2. Naomi's state of mind is made clear in her response to those asking the question. She told them not to call her Naomi, because that name, which means "pleasant" or "lovely," no longer fit her circumstances. Instead, they should call her Mara, which means "bitter," because God Almighty had afflicted her. She left with a husband and two sons and is returning with no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren. Why call her "Pleasant" when the Lord has singled her out for calamity?

III. Ruth Finds Favor with Boaz (2:1-23)

A. Introduction of Boaz (2:1) – The author casually mentions that Naomi had a relative on her late husband's side, a man named Boaz. He was a man of means and status.

B. Meeting with Boaz (2:2-17)

1. Ruth asked Naomi for permission to go out and gather from the fields being harvested ears of grain that were dropped or left standing by the reapers. Naomi told her to go ahead. Having no idea who Boaz was, Ruth just "happened" to end up in Boaz's fields. Coming on the heels of the statement that Boaz was from the clan of Elimelech, the reader is to understand that what was happenstance from Ruth's perspective was in fact the hand of God.

2. In the same vein, v. 4 says "And *behold*, Boaz came from Bethlehem." Right when Ruth just happened to have "stumbled" onto Boaz's portion of the field, Boaz arrived at his field from the town, and Ruth just "happened" to be where Boaz saw her. He asked about her and was told she was the young Moabite who came back with Naomi from Moab and that she had requested permission to glean and had been hard at it from the early morning.

3. Boaz told Ruth not to go and glean in any other field but to remain in his field. He also told her she need not worry because he was instructing his men not to mess with her and gave her permission to drink freely of the water provided for the regular workers. Ruth was

blown away by Boaz's kindness and generosity. He was treating her essentially as an equal with his hired, Israelite field workers.

4. Boaz explained that he had heard all about the kindness and extraordinary commitment she had shown to Naomi. Later in the day he invited Ruth to share in the midday meal he had provided for his workers. He personally served her the food and provided her more than she could eat. He showed this foreigner compassion, generosity, and acceptance.

5. When Ruth returned to her gleaning, Boaz told his workers to allow her to glean near the piles of already cut grain and to throw some stalks on the ground for her to find. As a result, Ruth gleaned an amazing amount of grain that day, around 30 pounds.

C. Ruth reports to Naomi (2:18-23)

1. Ruth lugged her bounty back to town, and Naomi excitedly asked her where she had gleaned, the tone of which was no doubt along the lines of "Where in the world did you glean today that you made such a haul?"

a. When Ruth identified her benefactor as Boaz, whose name she presumably heard in conversations in the fields, Naomi praised Yahweh as the one "who has not abandoned his *hesed* toward the living and the dead" (Block, 673). Naomi recognized that God was at work in Ruth's "stumbling" into contact with Boaz and in Boaz's generosity to her. This caused her to realize that God had maintained his commitment to the well-being of her family, both to her and Ruth, the living, and to Elimelech and Mahlon, the dead. With a heart renewed by the hope of God's favor, she seemed to realize the potential Boaz posed for Ruth and for the survival of Elimelech's and Mahlon's line.

b. That Naomi was beginning to hope along these lines is suggested by the fact she exclaimed that Boaz was a close relative, one of their "kinsman-redeemers." "Kinsman-redeemer" is a term from Israelite family law that "describes not a precise kinship relationship but the near relatives to whom both law and custom gave certain duties toward the clan" (Hubbard, 188).

2. Ruth added that Boaz also told her that she could work in his field until they finished the entire harvest, meaning the harvest of both barley and wheat. Naomi approved of Boaz's offer, and as a result Ruth was in Boaz's fields from late April to early June. No further contacts with Boaz are mentioned, and one is left wondering what will come of Ruth's providential encounter with Boaz.

IV. Ruth Proposes Marriage to Boaz (3:1-18)

A. The proposal (3:1-15)

1. Naomi was interested in finding a husband for Ruth, someone who could provide her security and protection, and she saw Boaz as the one who should fill that role. In fact, she had a plan to encourage Boaz to assume what she perceived to be his responsibility,

presumably not realizing that he was not the *nearest* kinsman-redeemer. She called Ruth's attention to the fact Boaz would be spending the night on the threshing floor winnowing barley and then instructed her on what to do.

a. She told Ruth to "doll up," hide out at the threshing floor, and then after Boaz went to sleep uncover his feet (or legs) and lie down. She said Boaz would tell her what to do after that. This obviously was some kind of symbolic gesture that Boaz was expected to understand. Given Ruth's marriage proposal in v. 9, it may be that lying at Boaz's feet symbolized that proposal by presenting herself as one humbly seeking his protection.

b. Ruth did as Naomi had instructed. With his feet (or legs) having been uncovered, Boaz woke up shivering (better than startled) at midnight and was surprised to find a woman lying at his feet, a woman he could not recognize in the darkness. Boaz asked her who she was, and Ruth answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer." This was a way of asking him to marry her.

c. Ruth based her request on the fact Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer. But if he was legally obligated to marry Ruth as part of his kinsman-redeemer duties, why risk the nighttime rendezvous on the threshing floor rather than simply bring his duty to his attention?

(1) What I think is going on is that Naomi's view of the kinsman-redeemer's duty as encompassing a duty to marry Ruth in this situation was debatable. Perhaps Naomi was emboldened to have Ruth assert it because she recognized that God had providentially brought Ruth into contact with Boaz and thus suspected that Boaz would accept the alleged responsibility.

(2) Naomi probably had the matter raised in private to minimize embarrassment in the event she was wrong, in the event Boaz rejected the proposal. By raising it in private, the parties would have the option of keeping the matter between themselves.

d. The tension at this point in the story, as I see it, is whether Boaz will embrace that view of the kinsman-redeemer's duty, seeing it as a proper expression of the family-guardian principle inherent in the kinsman-redeemer role, or whether he will refuse to help, and perhaps even take umbrage at the request, by insisting on a narrower interpretation of his responsibility. Based on what has already been revealed about Yahweh's providential involvement and Boaz's character, one is not completely surprised by his response.

2. Boaz reacted very positively to Ruth's proposal. He told her not to fear as he would do *all* she asked, perhaps hinting that her request involved more than merely marriage.

3. Boaz acknowledged that he was indeed a kinsman-redeemer, the implication being (if I am on the right track) that he accepted the validity of Ruth's claim and thus the validity of her view of his duty. He added, however, that there was another kinsman-redeemer who was prior to him by virtue of being a closer relative to Elimelech.

4. Presumably Naomi was unaware that this other kinsman-redeemer had priority when she sent Ruth to Boaz. Boaz told Ruth he would bring the matter of her "redemption" to a resolution in the morning and assured her with an oath that he would redeem her if the prior kinsman-redeemer refused to do so. To "redeem" her presumably means not simply to marry her but to marry her *in the capacity of a kinsman-redeemer* so that the first child would have some kind of legal tie to the deceased and his property. As indicated in chapter 4, redemption by the kinsman-redeemer includes a transaction involving Elimelech's property.

B. Ruth reports to Naomi (3:16-18) - Ruth told Naomi all about what Boaz did for her. Naomi told Ruth to wait to see how things would play out, convinced that Boaz would pursue the matter to a conclusion that day. The reader is left in suspense as to how things will end up.

V. Widow Naomi Has a Baby (4:1-17)

A. Report of the legal process (4:1-12)

1. Boaz convened a legal assembly (4:1-2), a gathering at the city gate, and then negotiated with the nearer kinsman-redeemer (4:3-8). He told the other redeemer that Naomi was "selling" the field of Elimelech, their mutual relative. This is the first mention of any family land, and it is difficult to know what is going on here. It seems clear that Naomi has some kind of interest in Elimelech's field that was of no practical value to her in terms of easing her difficult circumstances, but the nature of that interest is not clear.

2. What I think is going on is that Elimelech had transferred to someone outside his clan the rights to possess and use certain property until the year of Jubilee when it would revert to him or his family. As Elimelech's widow, Naomi had a right to redeem that property back from that purchaser, but she was in no financial position to do so.

3. It seems Naomi was transferring ("selling") her right of redemption to Elimelech's nearest kinsman-redeemer, which that person presumably had to exercise or pass to the next one in line. Boaz told the other kinsman-redeemer to say whether or not he would redeem the property because if he would not then Boaz would. Note that the actual redemption of the property from the third person is not reported; "it takes place offstage, so to speak."

4. The nearer redeemer said he would redeem the property, and then Boaz informed him that doing so carried with it the obligation of marrying Ruth in order to have children by her so as to perpetuate Elimelech's name on the family land, to perpetuate his lineage in association with that land. Boaz simply presented as a legal fact the broad view of the kinsman-redeemer's duty that he accepted.

5. The other kinsman-redeemer declined to assume the responsibility of redemption as stated by Boaz. Because Ruth was young enough to bear children who would be legal descendants of Elimelech and thus an heir of Elimelech's field when he or she reached adulthood, it changed the financial calculus. He then relinquished to Boaz the right and obligation to redeem Elimelech's field and marry Ruth.

6. Boaz publicly called on the elders and people gathered at the gate to witness the symbolic act of transfer. They confirmed their role as witnesses of the transaction, pronounced a blessing on Boaz, and prayed for Ruth and Boaz.

B. A son is born to Ruth and Boaz (4:13-17)

1. Boaz and Ruth married, and the Lord granted them a son. The women of Bethlehem praised God for his kindness toward Naomi. Because Ruth was the child's mother and Ruth's commitment to Naomi's welfare was such that she was a greater blessing to Naomi than seven sons would have been, this child would be taught likewise to love Naomi and thus would be a blessing, comfort, and provider in her old age. Given the special caregiver relationship Naomi was to have with the child, the women exclaimed, "A son has been born *to Naomi*," meaning one has been born who will be a *de facto* son to Naomi and will care for her as such. Accordingly, they named him Obed, meaning "one who serves."

2. The last statement before the formal genealogy is that Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Obed's birth crowns the reversal of Naomi's suffering and represents God's reward for Ruth's faithfulness, but beyond that it has tremendous historical significance in that his grandson was the great King David in whose lineage would come the Lord Jesus.

VI. The Genealogy of Perez (4:18-22) –Daniel Block remarks (p. 736-737):

This book and this genealogy demonstrate that in the dark days of the judges the chosen line is preserved not by heroic exploits by deliverers or kings but by the good hand of God, who rewards good people with a fullness beyond all imagination. These characters could not know what long-range fruit their compassionate and loyal conduct toward each other would bear. But the narrator knows. With this genealogy he declares the faithfulness of God in preserving the family that would bear the royal seed in troubled times and in rewarding the genuine godliness of his people. If only the rest of the nation had demonstrated such covenant faithfulness at the same time! In this genealogy the name of Boaz and Obed are indeed proclaimed far beyond Bethlehem and Israel, to the ends of the earth.

But the narrator could not know what implications the piety of these characters would have on generations of his own people that would come after him. If only he could have known that in the glorious providence of God the *hesed* of Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi would have laid the groundwork for the history of salvation that extends far beyond his own time and place. For as the genealogy of Matthew 1 indicates, one greater than David comes from the loins of Boaz. In the dark days of the judges the foundation is laid for the line that would produce the Savior, the Messiah, the Redeemer of a lost and destitute humanity.