

Ruth: A Righteous Love Story

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by Tim Cox

The book of Ruth is a brief story describing a pleasant aspect of rural life. To romantics, Ruth could become the obsessive kind of idol. It has all the ingredients of a sappy soap opera: drama, tragedy, triumph, and romance (but, as we will see, the book is so much more). To scholars, Ruth is no less a treasure. "The book of Ruth is a Hebrew short story, told with consummate skill. Among historical narratives in Scripture it is unexcelled in its compactness, vividness, warmth, beauty and dramatic effectiveness—an exquisitely wrought jewel of Hebrew narrative art" (NIV Study Bible). With all these literary features, it is not surprising the book of Ruth continues to charm laypeople and scholars alike. But are these the only qualities that make Ruth an inspired part of Scripture? No. As we will see over the next four weeks, this ancient little book contains foreshadowing seeds of God's redemption, righteousness, and love for all people.

True to her name's meaning, Naomi's life was pleasant. It wasn't extravagant, but by living in God's land as one of God's people, she was well positioned. Abruptly, her circumstances changed. "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. [Elimelech]...with his wife and two sons, went to sojourn in the country of Moab....Now Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. They lived [in Moab] about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that [Naomi] was left without her two sons and her husband" (1:1, 3-5).

In 71 Hebrew words (1:1-5), Naomi lost her sustenance, her land, her husband, and her two sons. Her full life was now empty (1:21). If it were up to her, she would have lost her two daughters-in-law too, but God had different plans (vv. 8-14).

In one of the Bible's most powerful expressions of sacrificial love, Ruth declared, "Do not 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. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you from me" (1:16-17). And so, the stage was reset. The Lord "came to the aid of his people and gave them food" (v. 6). Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem (the "house of bread").

Ruth 1:22 tells us Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. This is significant for at least two reasons. First, the renewed fullness of the land foreshadows God's renewed blessing in Naomi's life. Second, it sets the stage for the upcoming events in the fields and at the threshing floor.

Without giving too many spoilers, let me summarize chapters 2-4. In 2:1, the author (possibly Samuel) tells us, "Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." In the next verses, Ruth "happens" to find herself working in a field that belongs to Boaz (2:3). And, just then, Boaz arrives from Bethlehem and takes note of Ruth. They exchange pleasantries and Boaz shows kindness to Ruth and Naomi

(2:8-23). Indeed, *God* shows kindness to Ruth and Naomi. Naomi says in 2:20, "May [Boaz] be blessed by the lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead" (quite the contrast to her words in 1:20-21).

In chapter 3, Naomi, emboldened by God's kindness (and, perhaps, by shortsightedness akin to her husband's, 1:1-2), develops a daring plan for Ruth to propose to Boaz. Ruth obeys and goes to meet Boaz in the dead of night at the threshing floor—a place in Israel's history that has often been the site of blessing and hope. Here, in this place, Boaz is startled in the middle of the night by a woman. Recovering and remaining righteous, he blesses Ruth for her kindness (3:10) but explains to her there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer to Ruth than he. Even so, he says, "If [the other man] is not willing to redeem you, then, as the lord lives, I will redeem you" (3:13). Unlike Naomi, Boaz entrusts Ruth's life to the lord. Ruth, in each chapter, shows God's kindness, love, and sacrificial character. Likewise, in chapters 2-4, God shows his kindness, righteousness, and love through Boaz.

In the last chapter (4:1-12), we get a front row seat to an intriguing custom from Israel's "former times" (v. 7). In verses 13-17 (again, 71 Hebrew words), God restores life and love to Naomi. She who once was bitter (1:20) is now blessed by the lord; 4:14-15: "Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age for your daughter-in-law who loves you...has given birth to him.'" And so it was that "Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David" (4:21). Matthew 1:5-6 expounds that Salmon was the "father of Boaz by Rahab [the Jericho prostitute], and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth [the Moabitess], and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king." From David's line was born Jesus, the redeemer of the world (Matt 1:16, Luke 3:23-32, John 1:29, Titus 2:11-14).

In these next four weeks, please join Bruce Forsee and me as we dive into the book of Ruth to learn more about God's compassion and redeeming love for his people.