

Ruth

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Lesson: Redemption

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the foremost German writer of his age (1749-1832). His most famous work was Faust. He is reported to have called the Book of Ruth "the loveliest complete work on a small scale, what Venus is to statues, and the Mona Lisa is to paintings, Ruth is to literature".

Ruth works like a play. The famine is the given circumstance. It raises the pressure on every character, the way heat drives elements into motion. Under that pressure, loyalty, loss, and redemption take their shape.

Even the character names are like a play:

- Elimelech: My God is King
- Naomi: Pleasant
- Boaz: Strength
- Mahlon & Chilion: Sick & Pining

If you were born in ancient Israel and your name was "Sick" or "Pining", you can pretty much bet that you are not going to be the hero of the story.

When the story begins, Naomi and her husband Elimelech were set up for a promising life with two sons. The famine caused them to move from Bethlehem to Moab, where their sons each found a Moabite wife. Once in Moab though, everything began to fall apart.

First Elimelech died, then Naomi's sons died.

Now, Naomi was living in a land with no extended family.

Q: How many people have lived in a place that's more than a couple hours from here?

<Wait for hands to be raised.>

When you lived away from your extended family, and in a different place, how did it feel?

Uncertain. No extended family to lean on. No one to borrow a car from if your car breaks down. You can really get into a problem situation fast when you don't have any backup.

So Naomi's life came apart very quickly, in the middle of a famine, and at a time when women were completely dependent upon men. She heard that the Lord was providing relief from the famine back in Bethlehem, 60 to 80 miles away, and she decides to go back home. She tries to get her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab rather than to go to what would be a foreign place to them, and Orpah kissed her and left them, while Ruth refused to leave Naomi.

Ruth 1:16–17

And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after 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: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

One of the greatest fears we have is to be alone. This is the greatest thing that a person can hear from another. It is complete commitment.

No matter how hard your circumstances are, it feels much better to have someone who will stand beside you like this.

Naomi and Ruth return to the lands of their kinsmen. This is where we need to discuss the customs that drove the rest of the story.

Leviticus 25:23-28

The lands are the Lord's, with families holding allotted portions. They do not own the lands the way we do. If a man becomes poor and needs to sell his fields, the nearest kinsman can buy it so that it doesn't drift into another house. If no one redeems it, it is still returned to the family during Jubilee. The objective of this practice is that the lands ultimately remain with the clan.

Under the custom of Jubilee, every 50 years the land is released back to the original owner, so anyone that buys the land is really buying the use of it until the next Jubilee.

So, Boaz will be buying Elimelech's land and crops just until the next Jubilee.

The near kinsman would gladly redeem Naomi to get the land if it weren't for Ruth. He could end up keeping the land forever if all prior claims to it were made extinct.

But adding Ruth makes the land legally Mahlon's, and at the next Jubilee Mahlon becomes the original family and keeps the land. So, the near redeemer would be spending money to buy and improve the land that will become another man's inheritance.

If the story were to be near the next Jubilee period, then the price of the land would be small. If it had many crop producing years left before it reverts, then it would be more costly.

A quick summary

Jubilee says that the field must come to Elimelech's house.

No son to Elimelech means the house is empty.

Ruth plus a redeemer fills the house.

So, the near kinsman only gets a field that will not remain his or lets the next kinsman pay if he chooses. Boaz pays.

Relatives that have sold themselves into service can also be redeemed.

Imagine we lived in a world where we followed God's rules and not man's.

Today, you can't sell a house without a lawyer. The land you buy is taxed forever and if you don't pay the taxes the State takes the land away from you. You pay taxes on the money you make – we won't even talk about all of the things that they government does with the tax money that is abhorrent to God. The government will tax you again when you spend the money that you were taxed on earning, and when you leave it to your heirs they tax it again.

Won't it be wonderful to live again in a world ruled entirely by God?

Boaz shows himself to be an upright man.

- He greets his workers with the Lord's name, and they respond in kind.
- We assume that he might find Ruth attractive, but we know that he praises her for her loyalty to Naomi and asks the Lord to repay her (Ruth 2:11-12).
- He puts Ruth under his protection, telling her to stay in his field and keep close to the young women, and warns the young men not to touch her (Ruth 2:8-9, 15).
- He gives her the water drawn by the men and a place at the midday meal.
- He gives her roasted grain (Ruth 2: 9, 14).
- He tells the reapers to let her glean among the sheaves and to pull handfuls on purpose for her, more than the gleaning law required (Ruth 2: 15-16)
- He sends her home with an ephah of barley (Ruth 2:17-18).
- He will not take her here while a nearer kinsman has the first right (Ruth 3:12-13).

Boaz is shown in every action to be upright.

Noami, understands the customs and can tell that Boaz is both an upright man, and that he is interested in Ruth. She would not have come up with the plan that she did, if there was any chance Boaz would take advantage of Ruth.

Noami advises Ruth.

Ruth 3:3–4 (KJV)

3 Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor: but make not thyself known unto the man, until he shall have done eating and drinking.

4 And it shall be, when he lieth down, that thou shalt mark the place where he shall lie, and thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do.

Ruth 3:8–10 (KJV)

8 And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself: and, behold, a woman lay at his feet.

9 And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman.

10 And he said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich.

This seems like a strange and possibly seductive thing for Ruth to do, but there is a reason for it.

God claims Israel the same way that Boaz claimed Ruth.

Ezekiel 16:8

Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine.

In our time, it is not uncommon for a young woman to target a wealthy older man, or for the wealthy older man to feel vanity at being approached by a younger woman who might only be interested in his wealth.

But Boaz refers to her as "my daughter" and although he could have taken her that night, he didn't and he followed his covenant duties fully. His joy is both that she chose him, and that she chose to redeem herself under the covenant rules.

The Book of Ruth is appealing to us because it is a sweet love story, where everyone involved acts in accordance with God's laws, and where it ends with happily ever after. The only negative connotations that we might see in Ruth are what we bring with us, not what is in the story itself. You almost need to go back and re-read the story from start to finish with that reminder to have its full sweetness.

As a man, it is a sweet joy to be chosen by a woman amongst all of a woman's other options.

As a woman, it is a sweet joy come under the protection of an upright man that loves you in the same way that God loves His people.

Ruth 3:11–13 (KJV)

11 And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.

12 And now it is true that I am thy near kinsman: howbeit there is a kinsman nearer than I.

13 Tarry this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; let him do the kinsman's part: but if he will not do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as the LORD liveth: lie down until the morning.

The most fortunate people grew up in households of such love and security as Ruth felt that night. I was one of those people with such a family. I never closed my eyes in fear. After all that Ruth has been through, she must have slept so peacefully at Boaz' feet with his promise that regardless of how everything turned out tomorrow that Boaz would do all that she needed.

It is sweet to think of them both going to sleep with the promise of so many good things to come. Think of how many nights you have gone to sleep weighed down by worry and concern, how miserable and long the night felt. Ruth and Boaz rested easy in the promise of a dawn that would be guided by God's laws and I imagine they both glowed with excitement.

If that is not the way we go to sleep, is it God, or is it us?

Ruth 4:13–17 (KJV)

13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bare a son.

14 And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

15 And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him.

16 And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it.

17 And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Boaz gives God the glory for everything. He says that the Lord has blessed Naomi with a daughter-in-law that loves her and says that Ruth was better than seven sons. Anyone that has a daughter-in-law that loves her mother-in-law knows how great a blessing this is. That relationship can create harmony or strife for the entire family.

There are so many stories in the Bible of hurt and hardship. Ruth is one of the few stories with such a sweet ending. Everyone in the story follows the Lord's laws and acts upright and humble before God. If this is the outcome we hope for, we should follow the same steps.

Remember the peace that you felt closing your eyes