

Shepherding Notes

Ruth

By Caleb Bunch

Perhaps you are wondering why we are reading the book of Ruth here. The first reason is that the book of Ruth takes place during the time of the Judges. Originally, Ruth was part of the book of Judges but was later separated and made into its own book. The second reason is that this book fits beautifully into the Christmas season. The entire point of this book is to point past itself to someone who is coming later. On the simplest level, this book serves as an origin story for King David. On a macro level, this book is revealing the providence of God as He prepared the way for the greater son of David who would be born in Bethlehem much later — Jesus Himself.

A Tale of Two Daughters

Naomi had been widowed in the land of Moab. The Moabites had been the national enemies of Israel for many years. While there, Naomi's husband and two sons had died, leaving her with two daughters-in-law. When she heard that "the Lord had visited his people and given them food" (vs. 6), she decided to return to her homeland. Initially Naomi planned to take both of her daughters-in-law back to Judea with her — in fact, according to verse 7, all three had started the journey together and were already on the road. We don't know how far they got before Naomi stopped and made a startling announcement: she told both of the younger women to turn around and go home to their parents.

At first, both Orpah and Ruth refused. Both wept. (vs. 9) Both said they were committed to remaining with Naomi. (vs. 10) So Naomi decided to persuade them. She painted a masterful verbal picture of their potential life back in Bethlehem — if they committed to going with Naomi, they would likely never have a husband or any children. This caused Orpah to forget everything she had previously promised and she bolted right back to Moab and out of the pages of recorded history forever.

Orpah is reminiscent of the seed that fell on rocky ground in the parable of Jesus. That "seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil." (Mark 4:5) Orpah ran back to perceived safety. Naomi said to Ruth, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." (vs. 15) Orpah was not just abandoning Naomi — she was abandoning God and turning aside to idols.

Ruth, on the other hand, is a beautiful picture of what happens when God has given someone the gift of genuine faith. Instead of following Orpah's lead, Ruth "clung to" Naomi. (vs. 14) Then she said the famous words: "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." (vs. 16-17)

By declaring that she was adopting Yahweh as her God, Ruth was abandoning everything behind her in Moab. Notice that she is not planning to add the Lord to her pantheon of deities. She states, "and your God my God" — not "and your God one of my gods." This sets the stage for what happens next as Ruth continues to be a great example of faith for the rest of this book.

"Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." — Ruth 1:16

When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, they were still in a state of desperation. Naomi seems to have taken on the responsibility of restoring the homestead to a usable state while Ruth took on the role of being the literal breadwinner. There are three things I want you to notice about the unfolding story here in chapter 2.

God's Providence

As Christians, we know that there is no such thing as luck or happenstance. God has planned, ordered, ordained, and structured the events of our lives. Sometimes when God puts the pieces together in shocking or surprising ways, people chalk it up to serendipity or fate. Verse 3 says that Ruth "happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz." This is not claiming that this introduction was based upon the luck of Ruth's decision-making. Rather, it is revealing that God divinely led her to the field of the one man in all of Bethlehem who would likely have any possible interest in Ruth.

Boaz

Why was Boaz probably the only eligible bachelor who would marry Ruth? First, Ruth was a Moabite. At this time, the Moabites were the chief enemies of the people of Israel. Moreover, the Israelites warned against marrying foreign wives. As noted in chapter 1, this did not apply to Ruth because by making her declaration to Naomi, she had rejected everything that it meant to be a Moabitess and committed herself to Israel's God. But so far this is just about why other men might not want to marry Ruth.

What made Boaz unique is that he was the son of one of the very few Canaanite women who had married an Israelite. His mother was Rahab of Jericho. It is highly possible — maybe even likely — that the reason he was unmarried as a self-described older man (see chapter 3) is due to his mixed heritage. He was in a unique position to redeem Ruth, and by the providence of God, Boaz was likely naturally inclined to show kindness and compassion where many of the other men in that community would have pushed Ruth away.

Character

Throughout this book you are going to see the high character of both Boaz and Ruth on display. In this chapter, you see the compassion and respect that Boaz exhibited toward someone to whom he had no obligation. Ruth displays high character in her tenacity to

work tirelessly in the fields for the good of her mother-in-law.

Here is the big thing I want you to notice: that is the first and only thing that they highlight about each other in their conversation. Boaz honors her with extra grain and with protection because her reputation of kindness toward Naomi preceded her. When Ruth returned home, she highlighted the character of Boaz. It is not clear from this chapter if either of them had any romantic attraction toward one another yet. For those who are still in the stage of life where you are looking for a husband or wife — take note of the fact that character matters. Boaz and Ruth present an excellent example of two followers of the Lord who lived out their faith before one another, and the Lord sovereignly worked the pieces together to bring their relationship into being.

"God divinely led her to the field of the one man in all of Bethlehem who would have any possible interest in Ruth. There is no such thing as luck or happenstance."

Today we have reached one of the most curious chapters in the Bible. Naomi has realized that Boaz and Ruth are perfect for one another. Even though Boaz was much older, he was unmarried and eligible to be her kinsman redeemer. So she hatched a scheme that would provide a rare opportunity for Ruth to privately put Boaz on the spot and ask him to ask her to marry him. If that sounds complicated, that is because it is. It would have been customarily unacceptable for Ruth to propose to Boaz — so she was told to propose to him that he propose to her. Ruth honored her mother-in-law's request, and as far as we can tell there was no pushback, which inclines me to believe that Ruth was fond of this idea — and fond of Boaz.

A Pure Encounter

Boaz and his men were staying at the threshing floor. This was a major time of celebration — there had just been a famine for an entire decade, and this was the first crop that flourished, resulting in the men working rigorously, followed by celebration. Ruth arrived at the threshing floor after the men had gone to bed for the evening. She uncovered his feet, ensuring that he would wake up from the cool evening air, and lay down beside his feet like a servant would do.

Some people have speculated that there may be some linguistic innuendo here and that there was an inappropriate physical relationship between Ruth and Boaz. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ruth and Boaz have always displayed the highest possible moral character throughout the entire book, and that does not fade away during this midnight encounter. Their conversation is chaste. Boaz is interested in protecting Ruth and her honor. He blesses Ruth in the name of the Lord and speaks of God on multiple occasions. My assumption is that most people who are in the process of sexual sin do not start communicating about the Lord like Boaz did. This was a pure and wholesome encounter. Before moving on — single people, please hear me clearly: do not try to replicate this. This chapter is not an instruction manual about dating.

Spreading His Wings

In their conversation, Ruth requested that Boaz spread his wings over her. This is a direct callback to something that Boaz had spoken to Ruth and that she had stored away in her heart. He had said in chapter 2:12: "The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to

take refuge!" Ruth is now making it clear that she believes the way the Lord has chosen to protect her is through being married to Boaz. He agreed, but acknowledged that the plan might hit a snag — he had to ensure that the closer kinsman did not plan to marry Ruth. As we will see in chapter 4, after hearing that Ruth was willing to marry him, Boaz wasted no time in getting the details worked out.

Once again we see God's providence on display. This is one of the most unlikely couples in history — common, average, everyday people brought together by dramatic circumstances. There are no miracles in this book. This is one of the best pictures we have in the entire Old Testament regarding the lives of honorable yet ordinary people. This story is showing us that God takes care of even the most minute of details in the universe. He had a plan for Boaz and Ruth to be together. He has a plan for you.

"There are no miracles in this book — just ordinary people and extraordinary providence. God takes care of even the most minute of details. He had a plan for Boaz and Ruth to be together. He has a plan for you."

Chapter 4 opens just hours after the close of chapter 3. Boaz went to the city gates in the early morning — the time when all village commerce would be most active — and he had the highest chance of encountering the redeemer who was a closer relative to Naomi.

A Reluctant Redeemer

The relative who was supposed to redeem Naomi had never lifted a finger to do so. Now, Boaz is going to press the issue. Boaz knew that it would be good for Naomi and Ruth if this man married Ruth because it would help them financially. But Boaz clearly goes about things in such a way that he ensured the unnamed redeemer would refuse. How? He highlighted that Ruth, the Moabitess, was part of the deal. Immediately the man who should have redeemed Naomi and married Ruth backed out because he was afraid it would cost him too much.

Ironically, this man who wanted to save his reputation and his inheritance is essentially written out of history. His name is never mentioned. Commentator Matthew Poole explains it this way: "Doubtless Boaz both knew his name, and called him by it; but it is omitted by the holy writer, partly because it was unnecessary to know it, and principally in way of contempt — that he who would not preserve his brother's name might lose his own, and lie buried in the grave of perpetual oblivion."

Jesus is the greater Boaz. He was not reluctant. He did not back out when the cost was high. He loved us with even more zeal and commitment than Boaz had for Ruth. Jesus is the true and better Redeemer who arose out of Bethlehem to save His bride at great expense to Himself. He is not ashamed to call us His own and even allows us to bear His name.

A Descendant for Naomi

Did you notice that Ruth's part in this story is over and now the focus has shifted to Boaz and Naomi? Naomi has been very central to this book. Unlike Ruth, she began in rebellion and returned to Bethlehem bitter. We see the Lord slowly but faithfully work in her life to bless and restore her. The final blessing is that she received an heir. As we saw in chapter 1, she had completely given up on the idea that she would ever have descendants. But God, in kind mercy, gave her the most important descendant in history.

A Final Word

The most important word in the book of Ruth is the last one. Why do these people matter in the scope of history? Why do we remember them? Why did God work all of these events together to produce an heir? This entire story is leaning forward with anticipation that someone important was coming from this unlikely pair.

This is how the New Testament begins, in Matthew 1:1: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king." The book of Ruth is an origin story, not just for David, but for the Son of David, Jesus Himself.

"Jesus is the greater Boaz — the true and better Redeemer who arose out of Bethlehem to save His bride at great expense to Himself. He is not ashamed to call us His own."