

SESSION #16

RUTH

The book of Ruth, as the first verse tells us, takes place “*in the days when the judges ruled*”. So here’s a book, a little story, that actually happens inside the book of Judges somewhere, perhaps about the time of Gideon. Even though it’s a separate book, the story happens within the 350 years of the Judges.

That is very important because it reveals that there were some instances of noble love, of personal faith and of high ideals in the midst of a society that had gone astray, run amok, in very many ways. It’s a beautiful gem in the midst of spiritual debris, or as someone has described it, the book of Ruth is a lily in the mud pond of Judges. And it shines, it just glows, like a lily in a mud pond would.

It’s the only Bible book which is given over completely to telling the story of a woman. There’s another book in the Bible named after a woman but it’s not entirely about her, the book of Esther. There’s a wonderful parallel between them, a mirror-kind of contrasting images.

Esther, which we’ll come to much later in our studies in the OT, was a young Hebrew girl who was brought to live among Gentiles. She married a Gentile husband who was on the throne of the kingdom of Persia. Fascinating story. You may know her as the beauty queen winner. She was a Hebrew.

Ruth on the other hand was a Gentile, not a Hebrew, and she was brought to live among the Hebrews – the exact opposite of Esther. She married a Hebrew husband who was in the royal line of Israel. So there’s a kingly kind of connection between both of their stories as well.

STRUCTURE & STORY

Ruth’s story is told in four little chapters. It’s a love story but it’s a love story with a twist. Oh yes, there’s a man-woman love story involved in it, but the over-arching love

story of the book of Ruth is not about a man-woman romance. The over-arching love story is the love of a woman for her mother-in-law. In most cultures of the world we save our worst jokes for who? – the mother-in-law. Here’s a woman who loved her mother-in-law to an incredible degree. And the love that Ruth had for her mother-in-law Naomi is really the frame in which this beautiful little story is presented.

It begins with “love’s resolve” in chapter 1. That is the resolve of Ruth to stick with her mother-in-law when it was not an easy thing to do. We’ll come back to the story itself in just a moment. Ruth is not among the people of Israel. Her mother-in-law was. But Ruth married one of Naomi’s boys and in that sense came into the family of the people of God.

But the husbands all died and left three widows. Naomi chooses to go back home again to Israel and Ruth resolves to go along with her, to leave her own home, her own family members, her culture, to leave everything familiar because she loves her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Then “love’s response”, chapter 2. In order to help her elderly mother-in-law Ruth has to go to work. It’s rather like she grew up in the days of manual typewriters and everybody’s computerized so she can’t get into the job market at the ordinary level. She has to do whatever she can do. And in that particular setting, that meant to gather the grain which is just left along the edges of the fields and try to get enough grain so that at least she can feed her mother-in-law. That is the response of love – to get out there and to work and do whatever she can to make sure that her mother-in-law is cared for.

And then chapter 3, “love’s request”. In the course of doing her duties to help her mother-in-law survive, she meets a man who is a marvelous character, Boaz. She ends up gleaning wheat and barley in his fields and she eventually asks him to perform what in Israel’s culture is something done by a kinsman-redeemer. We’ll come back to that again shortly as well. These are obligations that Boaz can perform to Naomi because he is a relative of Naomi’s family. And Ruth comes to Boaz and challenges him to perform those obligations as a close relative of the family.

Let me insert something here. If you know something of the story of Ruth, you like me, would probably be quite struck by “Mr. Right”, Boaz. He’s a wonderful character, I think one of the great characters of the OT. But what seems astonishing to me is that he is obviously the number one eligible bachelor in the town of Bethlehem. He’s a man of tremendous character in the days of the judges when there weren’t many people of character left. He’s an absolute man of integrity. But he’s not married! He’s a bachelor. Why in the world should he, at middle age – maybe even a little over the hill; he’s certainly not a young man just out of college – and he’s still a bachelor. Why?

Let me jump back to the book of Joshua with just an idea. Who was Boaz’s mother? We know who his mother is when you start comparing scripture with scripture. We know that his mother was Rahab. What did we know about Rahab from the Joshua story? What was her reputation? She was not one of the people of Israel. Furthermore, she’s from Jericho, that condemned city. More than that, her profession which stuck with her like a burr for thousands of years was what? – she’s a prostitute.

Now Bethlehem was a small-town, rural farming community. Here’s a man whose mother was a former prostitute. How many mothers in Bethlehem would be willing to give their daughter to Boaz? His mother was a prostitute! I think that became a social stigma that Boaz was never able to overcome.

So, in chapter 3 Ruth appeals to Boaz to perform the kinsman’s obligations. And Boaz responds positively even though it was not an easy thing for him to do.

And by chapter 4 we have “love’s reward”. Ruth marries Boaz and they have a son. And that little grandson for Naomi is somebody very special to that mother-in-law. So here’s a book that begins with a set of funerals and it ends with a wedding.

The story of the book of Judges, you remember, went down, down, down. But in the middle of that mud pond is this little lily that starts with funerals and ends with a wedding – it goes in the opposite direction altogether, in so many ways.

TYPE PICTURES

As we take a look at the characters and the outworking of the stories in the book of Ruth, there are a couple of interesting things we want to note. First of all, Naomi, is a type picture of Israel in the early days of the theocracy. Naomi married a man named Elimelech. Naomi's name means "pleasantness". Elimelech's name means "my God is my king" – which should have been the whole nation's testimony during that time: "my God is my king". They were living in the theocracy period. Here's a man whose name means exactly that. He's married to "pleasantness", Naomi. They live in a wonderful town, Bethlehem, the name of which means "the house of bread".

They had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. We're not too sure what their names meant. One interpretation is that Mahlon means perhaps something like joy or singing or song. Chilion perhaps means something like an ornament or something beautiful or perfect.

So here is a beautiful microcosmic picture: one little family in Israel under God, the invisible King; Elimelech's name means that. His wife is "pleasantness", Naomi. They have offspring of joy, ornament, perfectness; they live in the house of bread. What could be better? In fact, it's a picture of what Israel was like at the very beginning of the theocracy and what they should have been from there on. The problem is that they moved very quickly downward.

Likewise, the family of Elimelech during a period of famine, as verse 1 tells us, moved from Bethlehem, the house of bread, to Moab, a nation that worshipped idols. Just as the whole nation of Israel had left the provision that God made for them and went astray following other gods.

Here's a little family who physically experiences what Israel spiritually had already begun to do. What is the result of that kind of journey? Well, the result of that journey is epitomized by what happens to the family in physical terms, which shows what happened to Israel in spiritual terms.

Elimelech died. Well of course he died. His name was "my God is my king" but God is no longer his king. He's gone away into Moab. He died and Israel could say the same thing: *God is no longer my King. I'm dead as far as that's concerned.* Not only that, but Mahlon and Chilion died. There's no joy, no singing, no ornament, there's no

perfectness. All of that wonderful blessing for this family has gone. The two sons die. They married Moabite girls but they died shortly thereafter.

And when that happened, Naomi – whose name had been pleasantness – decides that her new reality means she is no longer pleasantness. She said, *Don't call me Naomi any more, call me Mara, which means bitter, for God has dealt bitterly with me.* Her husband's dead, her two sons are dead.

There are three widows left by the end of the first part of the story. Their tragedy mirrors what happens to Israel during the entire period of the Book of Judges. And this little family demonstrates this truth in a microcosmic sense.

There's another picture in the book of Ruth and it's Ruth herself. She is seen as a picture of the New Testament people of God, the Church. She is a destitute alien. She doesn't have any right to claim any connection to Jehovah God. There's no covenant between God and the Moabites. And yet she seeks refuge with Jehovah. Her famous phrase is *"where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God."* It isn't a woman saying that to her husband. It's Ruth saying it to her mother-in-law. She finds refuge in Jehovah, the God of her mother-in-law, even though she doesn't have any right to claim God to be her God.

Then eventually she begs kindness from Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer. And Boaz himself shows up as a wonderful picture of Jesus Christ, an OT illustration of who Jesus will be as our kinsman-redeemer, the One who comes to die for us, to redeem a people, the Church, to be the One who buys us as His bride. It's what Boaz does.

He has to take Ruth to be his bride when he buys the field that belongs to Naomi. And Ruth is part of the package deal in that kinsman-redeemer obligation. He buys the field that belonged to Elimelech and Naomi, it was in debt, they'd lost it. He buys it back so that Naomi can have property again. Part of the deal was that he had to marry Ruth.

A wonderful picture of the kind of role that Jesus would play when He came. Boaz has the right as a near kinsman; he has the power, the financial ability; and he has the will to do what is required to redeem Naomi, her property and Ruth. He acts as the kinsman.

Leviticus 25 and Deut 25 both tell us what those obligations are. It's a wonderful picture of Jesus.

Then as Ruth and Boaz get married and begin their family, one of the wonderful outcomes of the book of Ruth is that Ruth herself becomes the great-grandmother of the most famous king of Israel, David. And as such, she – a Moabite – brings all Gentiles into the line that ends up in Jesus Christ the Messiah.

She's mentioned again of course in Matthew chapter 1 which gives all of that descendant line down to Jesus born in Bethlehem, the same place she lived in, the house of bread.

But Ruth is a picture of you and I. We don't deserve to be God's people. We don't deserve to be His Bride, the Bride of Jesus. We don't deserve that. Only by His mercy and grace as He exercises His kinsman-redeemer role for us, we can call Him our Beloved and look forward to that wedding ceremony at His father's house some day.

During a period when "*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*", here were at least three people who did what was right in *God's* eyes. They were just ordinary people, but with remarkable faithfulness to God and to each other. And through their faithfulness, God provided the Messiah for an entire world of unfaithful humanity!

Naomi, Ruth & Boaz are the main characters in the story, but in reality, THE MAIN character is GOD – the book of Ruth is primarily a story about God and His faithful dealings in the lives of ordinary people. And He hasn't changed. He is still working faithfully in your life too.

In the next session, we'll get into 1 Samuel and the stories of Samuel, Saul and David.
