

## RUTH

*"But Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever 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. Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.'" Ruth 1:16-17*

### A FAMINE IN THE LAND

In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land of Israel. Elimelech took his wife, Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, away from Bethlehem, Judea, to the country of Moab. Bethlehem means 'the house of bread' and yet there was famine in Bethlehem. The land flowing with milk and honey was being judged by the Lord with famine. The name Elimelech means *'my God a King'*. Naomi means *'pleasant'*. However, their children's names were Mahlon (*sickness*) and Chilion (*consumption*). One wonders why parents would call their children 'sickness' and 'consumption'. It must have been a terrible time in the history of Israel.

The rabbis of Israel believed that Elimelech's family left Israel in the days of Ehud, and that Naomi and Ruth returned during the judgeship of Deborah. It is also believed that Samuel edited and included the book of Ruth in the Scriptures. It is well placed after the book of Judges and before the books of Samuel, as that is the time in which Ruth lived.

### DISOBEDIENCE LEADS TO DISASTER

The Puritan Bible commentator Matthew Henry condemns Elimelech for taking his family away from Bethlehem into the land of Moab, on the other side of the Jordan. Elimelech's care in providing for his family was without doubt commendable. But by taking his family for so long into the land of the heathen, he dishonoured God, weakened the hands of his brethren, and set a bad example for others. *"It is an evidence of a discontented, distrustful, unstable spirit, to be weary of the place in which God has set us, and to be for leaving it immediately whenever we meet with any uneasiness or inconvenience in it."*

The fact that his sons married Moabite women receives further condemnation from the Bible commentator. Matthew Henry notes that Orpah is said to have returned to her gods (1:15). He also notes that it is a tradition of the Jews that Ruth was the daughter of Eglon, king of Moab, although there is no Biblical evidence for this.

It does not appear that the Moabite women converted to the Jewish religion before their marriage to the sons of Elimelech. Matthew Henry notes that the death of Elimelech and his two sons are evidence of the Lord's judgment upon them: *"their days were shortened because they transgressed the Law in marrying strange wives."*

Naomi lost her husband and then her children. The country of Moab, which had afforded them shelter and supply in a time of need, now held no attraction at all. Naomi determined to return to Bethlehem.

### A TIME TO LEAVE

Naomi then urged her daughters-in-law to return to their father's house. She dismissed them with commendation and prayer: *"Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."* (1:8-9)

She kissed them and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, *"Surely we will return with you to your people. But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go - for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them until they were grown? Would you refrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my*

*daughters, for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!' Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her, and she said, 'Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.'"*

### **DISCOURAGEMENT OR DISCERNMENT?**

Matthew Henry asks whether Naomi did well to discourage her daughters-in-law from going with her, when by taking them with her she might save them from the idolatry of Moab and bring them to the Faith and worship of the God of Israel? Matthew Henry believes that Naomi did want them to come, but not upon her account. She wanted them to make a deliberate choice, to count the cost. *"Our Saviour took this course with him who, in the heat of zeal spoke that bold word, 'Master I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest.'" Come, come, says Christ, canst thou fare as I fare? The Son of Man has not where to lay His head..."* Matthew 8:19-20.

Henry comments: *"Thoughts ripened into resolves by serious consideration are likely to be kept...whereas what is soon picked is soon rotten."*

*"Orpah was easily persuaded to yield to her own corrupt inclination and to go back to her country, her kindred in her father's house...to Orpah the representation Naomi made of the inconveniences they must count upon if they went forward to Canaan sent her back to the country of Moab, but, on the contrary, it strengthened Ruth's resolve."*

### **TWO DIFFERENT DECISIONS**

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and bade her farewell forever. Naomi's kiss showed that she had affection for Orpah and was sad to leave her *"yet she did not love her well enough to leave her country for her sake. Thus many have a value and an affection for Christ, and yet come short of salvation by Him, because they cannot find it in their hearts to forsake other things for Him. They love Him and yet leave Him, because they do not love Him enough, but love other things better. Thus the young man that went away from Christ went away sorrowful (Matthew 19:22) but Ruth clave unto her...Ruth puts an end to the debate by a most solemn profession of her immovable resolution never to forsake her, nor to return to her own country and her old relations again.*

*"Nothing could be said more fine, more brave than this. She seems to have had another spirit, another speech...it is an instance of the grace of God inclining the soul to resolute choice for the better part."*

### **DETERMINATION AND DEDICATION**

*"Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."*

Here we have resolution, dedication, and conversion. *"I have decided to follow Jesus! No turning back!"* Ruth's loyalty and determination resound through the ages and provide a solid testimony and inspiring example to each one of us.

Ruth presents a most admirable testimony. She is modest, meek, courteous, loyal, responsible, gentle, and yet decisive. Ruth always seems to be doing the right thing at the right time. And she does it gracefully. Ruth never swerves from her unselfish purpose during the many trials that followed. She did not seem to complain because she had given up everything: her country, her relationships or the chance to marry a man from her own country. She gave up everything with the resolution of fierce quietness.

### **RESOLUTION**

At this, when Naomi saw that she was determined, she stopped trying to persuade her to change her mind. They both turned their faces resolutely towards Israel, the young and beautiful Ruth, and the old and wise Naomi.

## **A DIFFICULT JOURNEY**

The distance they had to travel was under 200km, but this represented a long fatiguing and dangerous journey. For two women alone, with neither money nor protection, with no transport, they had to ascend mountains and descend into deep valleys on foot, crossing the Arnon and Jordan rivers. The journey would have taken them to desolate places, which would have tried them severely.

## **A NEW BEGINNING**

They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. This was the first of the harvests, with the wheat harvest following shortly thereafter. They now had an opportunity to provide for the coming winter.

## **GLEANING**

When we take God for our God, we must take His people for our people and having cast in our lot with them, we must be willing to take our part with them, enjoying both the good and enduring the bad. In Bethlehem, in order to support herself and her mother-in-law, Ruth performed the lowliest of tasks. Gleaning was a provision in the poor laws of Israel. The poor were allowed to follow the reapers and gather up the fragments of grain, which fell, or were left behind, for the poor. This was no free handout; it was back straining, long and hard work. Plainly, Ruth had a high work ethic. Her humility and industry were evident to all. She worked long and hard, from early till late, only resting once in the shade. As the servants testified: *"...she came and has continued from morning until now, though she rested a little in the house."* (2:7) *"So she gleaned in the field until evening, and beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley."* (2:17)

## **IN THE FIELD OF BOAZ**

Here we also see the hand of God's providence. *"And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech."* (2:3)

Boaz is described as a mighty man, of great wealth, mighty in the law. The name Boaz means 'in Him is strength.'

The first time we read of Boaz he is coming to encourage the reapers: *"The Lord be with you!"* And they answered him: *"The Lord bless you!"* (2:4). Boaz is evidently not only a diligent master, but also God honouring believer. He is also observant and concerned as he asked after the gleaner, Ruth.

## **THE GENEROSITY OF BOAZ**

Boaz encouraged Ruth and generously made provision for her: *"Then Boaz said to Ruth, 'You will listen, my daughter, will you not? Do not go to glean in another field, nor go from here, but stay close by my young women. Let your eyes be on the field, which they reap and go after them. Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn...It has been fully reported to me all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth and have come to a people whom you did not know before. The Lord repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under Whose wings you have come for refuge.'" (Esther 2:8-12)*

Boaz was kind to Ruth and showed her favour. He ordered his servants to be respectful to her and helpful. He commended her diligence on behalf of her mother-in-law, and prayed a blessing from the Lord God upon her labours.

Boaz was evidently a man of God, a man of intelligence and observant. He appreciated Ruth's quiet industry, her modesty and purity. He made many provisions for her, and invited her to join his workers for the mid-day meal. When Ruth returned to Naomi at the end of the day with a bushel of barley, Naomi questioned her closely, and declared: *"Blessed be the one who took notice of you...blessed be he of the Lord who has not forsaken his kindness to the living and the dead!"* (2:19-20)

When she hears that the man who has favoured her so is Boaz, Naomi exclaims: *"This man is a relation of ours, one of our close relatives."*

### **A KINSMAN REDEEMER**

The Law of God provided for a close relative to be a kinsman redeemer to avenge wrongful death in a case of murder (Numbers 35:19-21); to buy back property which a poor relative many have been forced to sell to settle their debts (Leviticus 25:25); to redeem relatives who had been sold into slavery to settle their debts and set them free (Leviticus 25:47-49); and to marry the widow of a deceased relative (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

And while Naomi, makes her schemes in order to provide for Ruth a bright future, the Law of God had already done so. Boaz did not actually need to be manipulated into doing his duty by a mother-in-law's schemings; he was committed to doing the right thing anyway.

Naomi advises Ruth to place herself at the feet of Boaz and seek his protection as a kinsman redeemer.

*"I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are our close relative."* (3:9)

*"Then he said, 'Blessed are you of the Lord, my daughter! For you have shown more kindness at the end than at the beginning, in that you did not go after the young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you request, for all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman.'" Ruth 3:10-11*

*"I will perform the duty for you. As the Lord lives!"* (3:13)

Upon hearing the report back from her daughter-in-law, Naomi declared: *"Sit still, my daughter, until you know how the matter will turn out; for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day."* (3:18)

Boaz displays honourable and businesslike character traits, going to the gates of the city before the elders and challenging the closer relative as to whether he was willing to fulfil his duty, then publicly informing all that he had the intention of becoming engaged to Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be his wife.

### **A GOD HONOURING MARRIAGE**

Some have tried to describe the romance in Ruth as an example of a mixed marriage. Of course, it was nothing of the sort. The people of Moab were descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham.

The rabbis teach that Ruth had golden red hair and warm eyes, and that Scriptures tell us that David had red hair. And Ruth was a convert to Jehovah; she had embraced the people, the culture, the language and the God of Israel. This was neither an interracial marriage, nor an interfaith marriage. In the word of the Psalmist, Ruth could say: *"I have chosen the way of Truth, I have set my heart on Your laws."* Psalm 119:30

In the same way as Moses chose to be *"mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time."* Hebrews 11:25, Ruth had turned her back on the idolatry of Moab and had embraced the God of Israel. The book of Ruth is about wise choices. Many years before Joshua had challenged the people of Israel: *"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household we will serve the Lord."* Joshua 24:15

As Solomon had prayed: *"So give your servant a discerning heart to...discern between right and wrong."* 1 Kings 3:9, so both Ruth and Boaz evidenced a discerning heart.

As our Lord Jesus commented: *"Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken from her."* Luke 10:42

## **A MISSIONARY CALL**

The story of Ruth is a type of God's call to the gentiles. God's Sovereignty is seen throughout this beautiful story. We can see how everything was done in the light and in accordance with God's Law. Ruth was lifted out of obscurity and poverty to influence and prosperity. From the marriage of Ruth and Boaz sprang an auspicious lineage, the house of David (Matthew 1:5). Before the birth of her son Obed (which means servant) Ruth was assured that her child's name would be "*famous in Israel*" (Ruth 4:4).

Naomi was told that the child would be a nourisher of her old age. Her neighbours, rejoicing with her declared "*and may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old-age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.*" Ruth 4:15

## **AN ANCESTOR OF DAVID**

And Obed was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. And so Ruth, the Moabitess, who had chosen to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem, and who had embraced the God of Israel, became the great-grandmother of King David, and an ancestor of the Messiah Himself.

*"Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you will lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."* Ruth 1:16

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