

RUTH: “From Rags to Riches”

Do you know which book of the Bible is read in Jewish synagogues on the Day of Pentecost? Ruth is one of the 5 “Festival Scrolls” traditionally read by the Jews at the different Festivals. This book is very appropriate to read at Pentecost time.

The book of Ruth has drawn many tributes over the years, and has even been described as “the perfect story,” “the most beautiful short story in the world” and [Goethe] “the loveliest complete work on a small scale.” We can glean many helpful lessons from this book, so let’s go through it today. A Cinderella story is always interesting and enjoyable—especially if we know it is true. This story is absolutely true—God has inspired it to be preserved in His Word for us. It is an exciting “Rags to Riches” story. It’s even more striking when you consider the context of the period in which it occurred.

Ruth 1:1 “In the days when the Judges ruled.” The previous verse (Judges 21:25) shows that those were dark days.

Verse 1D Moab was east of the Dead Sea. It was one of the nations that oppressed Israel during the period of the Judges (Judges 3:12ff), so there was hostility between the two nations. The famine must have been quite bad for them to go there.

Names in the book of Ruth

The mood of the story is fashioned from the start through the meanings hidden in the names of the participants. Elimelech means ‘my God is king’ foreshadowing the continuance of his line to David the king, who is God’s anointed one on earth. Naomi means ‘my gracious/pleasant one who later asks to be called Mara, ‘bitter one.’ Naomi’s name change elicits the emotions that she is experiencing and the direction of the story. Even the names of the two sons, Mahlon meaning ‘sick’ and Chilion meaning ‘weakening/pining,’ alerts the reader to their physical conditions. The two daughters-in law names, Orpah (meaning nape or back of the neck) turns her back on Naomi and returns to her people; Ruth, meaning ‘friend’ pledges her loyalty to Naomi. Boaz ‘strength is (in) him’ or ‘he comes in strength’, becomes the kinsman redeemer and Obed’s name appropriately means ‘servant.’ Obed is the ancestor of King David and Israel’s kings are servants of God. The use of names in the Book of Ruth deepens the story’s flavour and assists the reader in appreciating the text’s meaning.

Verse 2 “The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.”(Ephrath was an earlier name for Bethlehem.)

Verse 11 “But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?”

Refers to “Levirate marriage,” the obligation of a dead man’s brother to care for the widow (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This law kept the widow from poverty and provided a way for the family name of the dead husband to continue.

Verses 16-17 ¹⁶“But Ruth replied, “Don’t 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. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

A great example of total commitment! Ruth was willing to abandon everything—her homeland, her family, her old religion and her entire identity, to follow Naomi. We can see that this parallels our Christian calling, and baptism contract or covenant to God. We have to be totally committed to a new life—leaving the old life behind.

It’s much easier to be like Orpah, and go back to the world—and many people do. Jewish oral tradition says that Orpah became the grandmother of Goliath.

Notice the influence of Naomi here too. She had loved and cared for Ruth, and her life was a powerful witness to the God she served. Ruth was drawn to her and to the God she worshipped. The fact that later Ruth became the great-grandmother of David, and an ancestor of Jesus, showed what a profound impact Naomi’s life made! Ruth means “friend.” She was certainly a devoted friend to her mother-in-law.

Verse 20 “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.” “Naomi” means “pleasant.” “Mara” means “bitter.” Here’s an example of the way that even dedicated and loyal followers of God, like Naomi was, do go through times of trial, trauma and severe distress.

Verse 22 “So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.”

Bethlehem, about 5 miles from Jerusalem, is surrounded by lush fields and olive groves—its harvests were abundant. It was there that David would be born, and so would Jesus. So God was guiding the path of Naomi and Ruth there, so that those later events would occur there. There are two harvests a year in Palestine—the spring and the autumn. “The beginning of the barley harvest” was just after the Wavesheaf offering time (that was the first of the firstfruits)—at the beginning of the 7 weeks leading up to Pentecost. This book was set around Pentecost time.

Ruth 2:2 “So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.”

One of the instructions for Pentecost: Leviticus 23:22 “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.”

Ruth 2:3-7 ³“So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.⁴ Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!” “The LORD bless you!” they answered. ⁵Boaz

asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?” ⁶ The overseer replied, “She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi.” ⁷ She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

We learn good physical lessons from this, as well as spiritual lessons. Some of the physical lessons are that hard work is rewarded, generosity is commendable, even though Naomi felt bitter, she never lost her trust in God. Spiritually, we can consider the parallels of this story to our spiritual situation. Boaz is a picture of Jesus Christ. (The “kinsman/redeemer” as we will see in the next chapter.) So the “fields of Boaz” picture the “fields of the Lord.” To glean in the fields of God is to be occupied with interests and activities of God, rather than the “fields of the world.”

Ruth 2:8 “So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me.” Boaz told Ruth not to glean in another field, so God tells us not to be drawn away by the snares and trappings of this world.

Verse 9 “Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.” Boaz promised Ruth provision and protection in his field. So God promises to provide for us and protect us, if we stay in His field.

Hebrews 13:5-6 ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” ⁶ So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?”

Ruth 2:10 “At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner? ”This is how we feel like responding to God.

Verse 13 “May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,” she said. “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.” God looks after us, the weak of the world, totally unworthy of His attention!

Verse 14 “At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.” Boaz gave Ruth the fruit of his field, which totally satisfied her. So God gives us the spiritual food that alone can totally satisfy our needs.

Ephesians 3:17-19 ¹⁷ “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Ruth 2:15-16 ¹⁵ “As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. ¹⁶ Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.”

Boaz gave Ruth over and above in blessings—so God does for us, blessing us richly. We are like gleaners—we don't sow the seed, or water or care for the crop—the farmer does all of that. Gleaners come in from outside and benefit from the work of someone else. God generously allows us to share in His wonderful spiritual riches.

Gleaning takes effort and hard work, and so we need to “work out our salvation”—we can be laughed at and ridiculed for our beliefs from time to time, and looked on as the weak of the world, just as the gleaners came from the poverty-stricken people of the land.

Verse 23 “So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.”

This was the 7 weeks between Unleavened Bread and Pentecost. As mentioned earlier, in Leviticus 23:22, talking about Pentecost, God mentioned the principle of gleaning. We can think of the application of the principle of gleaning in our lives too. God allows us to glean of His spiritual harvest, to where we have plenteous spiritual blessings. He would like to us to share those with others. We have a spiritual harvest of gifts God gives us, love, gentleness, kindness, faith, etc—it is good for us to be willing to share the spiritual gifts God has given us, including the truth of the gospel, with others. Don't keep all our spiritual blessings to ourselves, but leave a few of them around so other people can glean them from our lives.

Ruth 3:1-9 “One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for.”² Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor.³ Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking.⁴ When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”⁵ “I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered.⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.⁷ When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down.⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!⁹ “Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

Naomi's instructions here seem a bit precocious to us, but they need to be understood in view of the Israelite customs and laws at the time. The role of the kinsman/redeemer is important here.

Leviticus 25:25 “If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold.” The Hebrew word that is used for this close relative is “goel”—a “kinsman-redeemer.”

Another responsibility of a close relative is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. If a husband died before having a male heir, then an unmarried brother of the deceased was to marry the widow and produce the first-born son in his brother's name. If there were no eligible brothers available, then the duty passed on to the closest eligible male relative. In Ruth's case, there were no brothers available, and thus Boaz, as a close relative, had a responsibility towards Ruth as well as towards the family property which

Naomi was forced to sell out of poverty. So Ruth's behaviour in Chapter 3 was not some indiscreet escapade, but rather her legally proper initiative to tell Boaz that she was willing for him to take on his responsibilities as kinsman-redeemer. Naomi knew that after the harvest party, Boaz, along with his servants, would be spending the night at the threshing floor in order to guard the winnowed grain. (See Judges 6:11). Naomi's plan was just a sensible and logical (and also romantic!) way for Ruth to communicate her wishes to Boaz.

Naomi is a picture of God's Church, which brings us into contact with Jesus Christ and encourages us to draw closer to Him, and to look forward to being His bride on His return.

So Ruth expressed her desire to be his wife, which takes a bit of nerve, when you realise she was a penniless stranger, an unclean Gentile (Moabitess) and Boaz was a wealthy, highly respected land owner.

There's even more of a credibility gap between us weak and frail humans and the perfect, eternal, all-powerful Jesus Christ, yet we purpose to marry Him! But He accepts us as Boaz accepted Ruth.

Ruth 3:10-11 ¹⁰“The LORD bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.”

We could run after the things of the world rather than Jesus Christ. He appreciates our devotion to Him and will reward it. Verse 11A is what He says to us!

Verses 12-18 ¹²Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. ¹³Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.” ¹⁴So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, “No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor.” ¹⁵He also said, “Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town. ¹⁶When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ¹⁷and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’” ¹⁸Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.”

Ruth 4:1-10 Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, “Come over here, my friend, and sit down.” So he went over and sat down. ²Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. ³Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. ⁴I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.” “I will redeem it,” he said. ⁵Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi,

you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property." ⁶ At this, the guardian-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." ⁷ (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalising transactions in Israel.) ⁸ So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰ I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!"

Verse 6 Some have thought as Boaz pictures Jesus Christ our redeemer, the brother of Boaz pictures the Law, which cannot redeem us! Although Ruth and Boaz loved each other, Boaz wasn't free to take her as his wife until he had redeemed her from a prior claim. Similarly, Jesus had to redeem us from the claim of sin on our lives. But He redeemed us and bought us with His life blood, becoming our "Kinsman/Redeemer." God has always been the great Kinsman/Redeemer of His people. He rescued them from bondage in Egypt "I will redeem you with a stretched out arm." Job was depending on his goel when he said "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

Ephesians 2:12-13 ¹² "remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Including Gentiles, like Ruth, and us!

Ephesians 5:31-32 shows that we marry Christ. The kinsman/redeemer had to have 3 prerequisites—he had to be a close relative, wealthy and willing.

Jesus is a close relative: Hebrews 2:11 "Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters."

He is wealthy: 2 Cor. 8:9 "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

He is willing: He voluntarily laid down His life for us.

Like all rags-to-riches stories, Ruth has a happy ending. Not only do Ruth and Boaz get married and live "happily ever after," but even more fantastic, we see in Verses 11-16 that Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David. Jewish tradition suggests David was born on the Day of Pentecost. So this poor woman from Moab becomes part of the Messianic line of ancestors of Jesus Christ. What a great story!

There are many lessons we can learn from the book of Ruth.

1. A chief lesson is that God is active in our affairs. He is watching over His people and brings blessings to those who trust Him.

2. This is a book about friendship. It shows the great value of friendship: the devotion of Ruth to Naomi, the care of Naomi for Ruth, and the love of Ruth and Boaz.

3. We learn how God can help people who are struggling and suffering, as Naomi was in Chapter 1. God is faithful, and guides His people from crisis to victory, from rags to riches.

4. One lesson of the book is that Jews and Gentiles will be united by God. It's interesting that Jesus descended from a union between a Jew and a Gentile. There is reason to believe the 2 loaves of bread offered at Pentecost picture the Jews and the Gentiles.

The book is particularly meaningful at Pentecost time, the Festival Day which pictures the Church of God, the first fruits of the spiritual harvest, spiritual Israel coming from both Jews and Gentiles, and the wonderful spiritual blessings we receive through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and which will culminate in our marriage to Jesus Christ! Just as He did for Ruth, God's grace will take us weak sinners from rags to riches!