

The Long and Winding Road

Ruth

“Love” is one of God’s most precious gifts. In some ways defying explanation, love is special, and anyone who finds love, finds a deep and beautiful experience. Some people are blessed to find love early in life. Others find it late. Some regrettably never find it at all. But anyone who has known love can confirm, it holds an amazing power for good.

On many levels, we find love’s presence touching our lives. There is the romantic love one to another that is the stuff of movies, books, and television. While not always present, normally we see a deep love of a parent for a child and a child for a parent. Love between friends is very real and the ancient Greeks even had a special word for this kind of love.

Virtually everyone is driven to find love as our souls shout for it. We want to find a firm love that is unconditional, one that accepts and embraces us without merit. It calls out from us our best. It moves us to levels of life we could never know otherwise.

Everyone knows Paul’s homage to love. “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Cor. 13:4-7). This is the love for the ages. It is a marvelous way to read and consider the love story of Ruth, one that echoes themes of love that find their pinnacle in the work of Jesus Christ for his people.

The Narrative

Ruth is written in relatively simple Hebrew. It was one of the first pieces I had to translate in school. The Hebrew is marvelous for anyone to read. It begs even a young reader of Hebrew to get lost in a great plot, one that has thrilling twists and turns, marvelous character development, and moral lessons that encourage us to pursue the best in life.

It begins simply. A famine in the Bethlehem area drives Elimelech and his wife Naomi to leave their land and people and go into the neighboring country of Moab. They take their two sons Mahlon and Chilion.

To a reader in Hebrew, the names alone evoke some insight into what might be coming. In ancient Hebrew times, your name stood for your life. It was like your resume. Hebrew readers would expect the names to stand for something significant in the lives of the characters.

“Bethlehem” can be translated “the house of bread.” This house was in a famine state and not living up to its name! So the family moves to find bread. “Elimelech” can mean “My God is king,” so we have the Lord invoked from the very beginning of the story. “Naomi” is “pleasant,” while Mahlon has a semantic range of meaning from “sickness” to “infertility.” “Chilion” can be translated “consumptive.”

From the names alone, we have indicators that the future may not be brought for the two boys, but that God will reign in the story, and that food, or the lack thereof, will likely play a role. The story doesn’t disappoint but lives up to the names!

The family settles in Moab, but never leave their faith in YHWY, the Lord God revealed historically through Moses to Israel. Over time, the sons take wives from among the Moabite women. Mahlon marries Ruth and Chilion marries Orpah. Over the ten years the family live in Moabite lands, Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion die. This leaves Naomi a widow who also lost both her sons.

Naomi calls her daughters-in-laws to her and tells them that YHWY has removed the famine from her homeland and she will be returning there. She urged her two daughter-in-laws to stay behind and remarry among their people. After much dialogue, Orpah agrees to stay behind, but Ruth insists on going with Naomi. In one of Scripture’s great proclamations of love, in beautifully rhythmic Hebrew, Ruth affirms,

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 (Ruth 1:16-17).

Ruth then returns to Bethlehem with Naomi.

The appearance of Naomi in Bethlehem created a stir. As people saw her, they called her out, “Naomi!” As noted earlier, names had significant meaning in that day, so Naomi replied, “Don’t call me Naomi” (or “pleasant.”) “Instead call me Mara,” which can be translated “bitter,” and Naomi told all that had happened losing her husband and sons.

Naomi and Ruth had returned right as the barley harvest was occurring. Under Israel’s laws given by God to Moses, the widows and foreigners were to be given the right to glean at the edges of fields during harvest season. It was an early form of social security! Leviticus 23:22 records the requirement,

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

Similarly, if the harvesting wasn't fully thorough in the main field, anything left behind was for those in need as set forth in Deuteronomy 24:19,

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands



With this practice in place, Ruth sought Naomi's blessing to go try and get some grain for them to eat. Naomi agreed, and Ruth went to glean.

As she was working, Ruth happened to enter the fields of Boaz, a close relative to Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech. Boaz came out to his fields to verse the harvest and saw Ruth at work. Seeing a newcomer in what was a relatively small community, Boaz asked about who she was. His workers told him that the strange woman was Ruth, the Moabitess who had returned with Naomi. Noting her strong work ethic, the harvesters told Boaz she had worked from early in the day non-stop, save for one short break.

Boaz was one who lived up to the Hebrew idea of his name, "in him is strength," and he imparted some of that strength to Ruth. He approached her and instructed her to work his fields and to stay close to his women. This was a protective gesture to stop anyone from molesting Ruth. It made it clear that while working, she was under his protection.

Ruth was deeply appreciative and taken aback that Boaz would be so kind to a foreign woman. Boaz explained that it was well-known what Ruth had done for Naomi, and he prayed the blessings of God on Ruth's life. Ruth was touched and expressed her gratitude.

Boaz's visit lasted quite a while, and during meal time, he invited Ruth to sit with the reapers and enjoy their good food. She ate her fill and even had some left over! As Ruth returned to work the fields, Boaz told some of his harvesters to purposely leave her some good sheaves that she could take.

By the end of the day, Ruth has collected an ephah of barley! While we don't know for certain what that equates to, it is somewhere around 30 to 50 pounds! When Naomi saw, she was astounded and asked the obvious question, "Where did you manage to get all of this?" Ruth told her all that had happened, and Naomi broke out into a prayer of gratitude, seeking God's blessings on Boaz.

Naomi explained to Ruth that Boaz was a close relative and a "redeemer" (Hebrew *ga'al*). The full import of this term at this time isn't clear. To some degree, it indicated that Boaz was related such that he could buy back any lands that had belonged to Elimelech. (This was a legal structure God placed with Moses to ensure that lands stayed within their immediate clans and families.) But there was likely more to the idea. Naomi urged Ruth to continue to work in the fields of Boaz, staying close to his maidens for protection.

When it came time to winnow the harvest, Naomi laid out an idea for Ruth. Naomi instructed Ruth to go at night to the winnowing floor, knowing that Boaz would be there overseeing the work. When Boaz slept on the floor, Ruth was instructed to sleep at his feet. The instructions aren't fully clear in English today, but there is a clear suggestion that this was a way for Ruth to see if Boaz might have a romantic interest in her.

After a good meal with good wine, Boaz was in great spirits when he went to sleep on the winnowing floor. It was about midnight when he awoke and discovered a woman at his feet. In the deep darkness that was real before the advent of ready light, Boaz awakened and cried out, "Who is there?" Ruth identified saying,

I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer (Ruth 3:9).

Boaz understood! He was a bit stunned, and he noted that Ruth could have pursued a younger man. He was honored that she chose him, and he assured her he would do the right thing! There was just one problem. Another fellow was closer in the line of "redeemer" than Boaz, and Boaz would need to work that out. Boaz urged her to sleep, and he assured her that he would figure things out.

Early in the morning, before others awoke, Ruth got up to leave. Boaz sent her with six measures of barley! Ruth rushed home and told Naomi all that had happened. Naomi saw the writing on the wall. She assured Ruth that Boaz wouldn't rest until he had resolved matters that day!

Naomi was spot-on. Boaz headed straight to the gates of the town, where all important business was conducted. He saw the closer redeemer and sought out whether or not he would want to buy Elimelech's fields back. The closer redeemer was interested until Boaz said it would have to come with "Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance" (Ruth 4:5). That was something the fellow wouldn't and couldn't do without upsetting his own family and inheritance.

Boaz was free then to redeem Ruth, and all that belonged to Elimelech, Mahlon, Chilion and Naomi. With the blessings and celebration of the people, Boaz married Ruth. Ruth became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy named Obed, who was a blessing to Naomi as well, with her having lost her two sons years before.

Before the story ends, we are told that Obed became the father of Jesse. Jesse became the father of David, the shepherd boy who became king. And as they say in love stories, they all lived happily ever after.

The Pictures of Jesus

This story does a marvelous job at hinting at things that echo the story of Jesus to a modern reader. The apostolic teaching doesn't explicitly draw parallels between the story of Ruth and the mission of Jesus, so we walk carefully in finding expressions of Jesus, but we can still see many echoes of the life and work of Jesus in this story.

The Love Story

No one should be mistaken. The book of Ruth is a love story. It is a story of people hungry and in need who go searching for life, but instead they find dead ends. It wasn't unfortunate just for the Israelites, but for foreigners as well. The story doesn't stop with misfortune, but culminates in blessing for Hebrew and foreigner alike as the loving redeemer steps in to make things right.

Scripture is a love story. From Genesis to Revelation, we read about humanity's plight through sins barrenness. It affects God's chosen Israelites and non-Israelites as well. Scripture teaches us that in Jesus' life, God stepped into our narrative and redeemed us. He paid the price to restore us to joy and life, with the bright promise of what the future holds. In our loves story with Jesus, we all live happily ever after.

Point for Home: *"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers"* (1 Jn. 3:16).

Our love story with God focuses on Jesus as our Redeemer. He acted out of love when he “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness” (Tit. 2:14). Importantly, the rest of Paul’s verse to Titus adds, “and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” This is to be our goal. We are to live as redeemed people bought with a precious price. Our love story makes a difference in who we are and what we do!

God’s Provident Hand

Repeatedly in the story, credit is given to God and blessings are called forth from God. When closely examined, the story has language and themes that come from the patriarchal narratives of Abraham and Sarah and Judah and Tamar. Yet woven tightly into this fabric is the overriding realization that God is in charge. This plan brought to fruition the birth of King David of Bethlehem Ephrathah. Absent God’s hand in this, Israel has no David, the prototype and progeniture of Jesus.

This story begins with God’s people leaving Bethlehem. But when we find the redemption, it comes from Bethlehem. This is the same place about which Micah would prophesy,

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days (Mic. 5:2).

Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem and fulfill this prophecy because from Bethlehem hailed Joseph, offspring of David. God’s hand weaves into a rich tapestry of history this love story that provides the historical basis for the Messiah to come redeem mankind.

Point for Home: *“We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”* (Rom. 8:28).

Faith is a marvelous thing. It allows us to see beyond the present difficulties of life. It moves us to understand that God is at work, doing things that only he can do with his foreknowledge and love. God’s provident hand is no less involved in our lives than in that of Ruth, Boaz, Elimelech or even sickly Mahlon. Without Mahlon, there is no story. Without Elimelech, there is no story. Without the famine, there is no story. Without hard work, there is no story. God is at work in his love story in our lives. He still has a kingdom to bring to completion and we play a role in that, to his glory!

Boaz the Redeemer

Boaz, the man of strength, is painted in strong colors in the story. The redeemer is one who is generous and giving. He is protecting and nurturing. He is observant and wise. He

is loving and kind. He is compassionate. He fulfills covenants with justice, mercy, and truth. This is the redeemer that changes history (see previous section).

Jesus, our ultimate Redeemer, has many of Boaz's traits, in maximum form! Jesus is strength. He is generous and giving. As Paul explained to the Philippians, Jesus "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). He did this for us!

Jesus is protecting and nurturing. As Jesus was praying in the garden, his thoughts were for his people. Jesus asked God, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me" (Jn. 17:11-12). Jesus stood up for the hurting, the outcast and those in need.

Jesus is observant and wise. Over and over in the gospels we read of his noting the hearts of people. He was able to meet them where they were. Those who would respond in faith, always found his mercy and acceptance. Those who were haughty felt his rebuke as he sought to move them from their pride to a place of humility.

Jesus was noted for his compassion. "When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things." (Mk. 6:34). Jesus wept when his friends Mary and Martha lost their brother, even though he was going to resurrect him. Jesus was a man of compassion.

Most importantly, Jesus fulfilled God's covenantal promise of restoring a relationship with humanity based on justice, mercy, and truth. Jesus the redeemer changed history and eternity.

Point For Home: *"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption"* (1 Cor. 1:30).

There are so many verses to choose from in writing on Jesus the Redeemer. For example, Paul's proclamation in Ephesians 1:7, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." It is the core of the Christian message. It is the gospel. It is the good news. Jesus has redeemed us. So, let the redeemed of the Lord say so! Let us proclaim his greatness to the world around us! Our God reigns, and he is a saving, loving, redeeming God! Amen!