

Ruth: Part 2

RUTH 1-4

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If you were here last Sunday morning, then you know that we started looking together at the book of Ruth, in a lesson that was requested by several of you. And we did something rather unusual last week in that we read the entire book, all four chapters! And I don't know about all of you, but that helped me to get the big picture. And that was our mission last week, to get the big picture, to try to understand what is in each of those four chapters. We tried to summarize what is in those chapters with some items at the front up here:

- We started with those tissues as a reminder that Chapter 1 is a chapter of **WEEPING**. We learned that Ruth lived during some of the most chaotic times in the history of God's people, during the time of the Judges, a time where everybody did pretty much whatever they wanted to do, with no regard for any consequences. There was a famine in the Promised Land, most likely a punishment from God for disobedience. There was a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi who (along with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion) fled to the land of their enemies, to the land of Moab, to find food. Once there, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi to continue raising their two sons alone. They get married to two local girls, Orpah and Ruth, but soon, Mahlon and Chilion also die, leaving these three widows alone - Naomi and her two young daughters-in-law. By this time, Naomi hears that there is now food back in Bethlehem, so she decides to go home and urges Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab with their own people. Orpah agrees, but Ruth insists on going with Naomi to Bethlehem. And so they separate – Orpah stays in Moab, while Ruth follows Naomi to Bethlehem. All of this, of course, is accompanied by a lot of crying, a chapter of **WEEPING**.
- In Chapter 2, we had a chapter of **WORKING**, as Naomi and Ruth get back to Bethlehem during the time of the barley harvest and Ruth heads out into the fields to glean. Gleaning was God's way of taking care of the poor in those days. Landowners were not allowed to harvest the corners of their fields, they were not allowed to go back through their fields twice, but instead, the poor were allowed to come in and pick what was missed on the first pass. And this is what Ruth was doing when she is noticed by the wealthy landowner, a man by the name of Boaz. Boaz is apparently somewhat older, and he is especially impressed by Ruth's attitude toward her mother-in-law, caring for this woman, even though Ruth herself is a foreigner. But primarily, Chapter 2 is a chapter of **WORKING**.

- Then, in Chapter 3, we come to a chapter of **WAITING**. With Naomi's encouragement, Ruth goes and meets Boaz on the threshing floor with what is basically a proposal. There was a custom in ancient Israel going back to God's Law, that when a woman's husband died before children were born, the husband's brother or another close relative had to come in and take that woman as his own so that the woman was cared for and so that the family name could continue. Well, it turns out that Boaz was a close relative, but there was one man who was closer. So, Boaz, doing what is honorable, agrees to take Ruth as his wife, but he says they need to **WAIT** to give this other man the opportunity. Chapter 3, then, is a chapter of **WAITING**.
- They do not wait long, though, only until they can meet with the elders of the city the very next morning. At first, in front of many witnesses, the other man says yes, that he will redeem his brother's name, but then he realizes that by doing so he would put his own inheritance at risk, so he eventually turns it down, and Boaz and Ruth get married. Chapter 4, then, is a chapter featuring a **WEDDING**. If you are wondering what a flip-flop has to do with a wedding, I would encourage you to go back and read Ruth 4 or go back and find last week's message online. And then, in those closing verses, we find out that Ruth and Boaz have a son, a man by the name of Obed, who will then go on to have several children of his own, including David, the king. Ruth, therefore, even as a foreigner, is brought into the family of God and becomes the grandmother of King David. Boaz' mother is Rahab the prostitute (rescued from Jericho)!

I think you will agree with me that the book of Ruth is a powerful short story, in fact, one of the greatest ever written. I have read that when Benjamin Franklin was ambassador to France, he would sometimes attend the Infidel Club, a group of men who spent most of their time searching for great literary masterpieces. And on one occasion, Mr. Franklin read the book of Ruth to the club, but he changed the names so that it couldn't be recognized as a book of the Bible. Apparently, when he finished reading, the group was virtually unanimous in their praise. They said, in fact, that it was one of the most beautiful stories they had ever heard, a masterpiece! And Mr. Franklin then had a great time telling them that it came from the Bible! This morning, then, I want us to go back to the book of Ruth and I'd like for us to bring out some very simple lessons based on the life of this amazing woman in the Bible. I would encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Ruth and keep your Bibles open as we study. We'll be noticing three lessons this morning:

- I. **As we look back over the life of this woman, the first idea I'd like for us to consider today is the fact that EVEN THE MOST UNLIKELY OF PEOPLE CAN TAKE SOME HUGE LEAPS OF FAITH, EVEN IN SPITE OF SOME TERRIBLE CIRCUMSTANCES. In fact, we see Ruth stepping out in faith and making some incredibly significant choices, despite coming from a completely pagan background, and despite moving to Israel, a land that itself was going through a time of moral chaos and one national crisis after another. So the idea is: Ruth reminds us that ANYBODY HAS THE ABILITY TO STEP OUT AND ACT ON FAITH.**

All through this book, we see a series of choices, one good choice after another, even in a time when most people were not making the choices that Ruth made. Remember: The book takes place during the time of the judges. On a national level, nobody cared about God's law. They were most likely being punished by God for their rebellion, even Elimelech and Naomi left God's promised land to flee to Moab (which in itself shows a tremendous lack of faith), but even with this, Ruth saw something in the life of this family that was somewhat appealing. As a Moabite herself, she sees this Jewish family and she for some reason decides, "I want that!" We remember what Ruth said when Naomi urged her to go back to her family in Moab. Perhaps with tears in her eyes, and yet with a determination based solidly on faith in the one true God of heaven, Ruth said in Ruth

1:16-17, ***“Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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 I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.”***

I hope we caught some of her reasoning there, ***“Your God [will be] my God!”*** With that statement, Ruth was making a break from her past, she was saying, “I understand that my people are wrong.” That is a hard conclusion to make, isn’t it? Several times in my life I’ve studied the Bible with people, and we get to the point where we believe in God, we believe that the Bible is his word, we believe what the Bible says about salvation and God’s plan for our lives, but then there is silence across the table, and the conclusion is, “If I accept what you are saying, and if I am baptized for the forgiveness of my sins, then I am admitting that my loved ones are lost, and that is a step that I cannot take.” Of course, those who have gone on before us are in God’s hands. That is not our decision to make. But there is sometimes this hesitation to leave the faith of those who have gone before us. I would suggest that Ruth had no such hesitation! Somehow she came to believe in the one true God of heaven, and she was ready to go all in. She was ready to put her hand to the plow and not look back. She was ready to cross over the Jordan River without hesitation, even though it meant leaving her family behind. That right there is a leap of faith. That right there involved taking a huge risk on her part. And I would emphasize: From a worldly point of view, Naomi had nothing to offer. Ruth was making this decision knowing that the financial future with someone like Naomi was probably rather bleak. Ruth was not in this for any kind of financial reward, but she was in it because she knew it was the right thing to do.

On the other hand, we think of Orpah. From a worldly point of view, Orpah made the safe choice. Orpah decided to go home to her family. Orpah decided to go back to the land of Moab. Orpah decided to stay with what she knew. Orpah decided to stay in a land where little children were offered as human sacrifices to pagan idols. Orpah stayed where she knew she could find a man and get remarried. And from a worldly point of view, that made more sense. From a worldly point of view, Orpah made the smart choice. And yet more than 3000 years later, we are not here to study the book of Orpah, are we? Orpah went home, never to be heard from again.

And so today, we are here to study Ruth. To me, it is interesting that we have two women in our congregation named Ruth, and this is in contrast to so many others we have studied in this series (Priscilla, Phoebe, Herodias, and Elizabeth). It is also interesting that we have one celebrity named after Orpah (although it was mispronounced and written down as Oprah). But Ruth shows us the importance of always stretching out in faith to take hold of what God has commanded, taking a risk to do something perhaps just outside our comfort zone. One of our teenage young men asked for a lesson on Ruth, “...because she forsook her pagan heritage to follow God in a time of great faithlessness.” Absolutely! We are reminded here that faith is not a feeling; faith is a choice. For Ruth, faith involved taking care of her mother-in-law. For Ruth, faith involved leaving her friends and family. For Ruth, faith involved leaving the land of her birth. Faith, then, is a decision to do what we need to do based on hearing and understanding the word of God. And so, is there something we’ve been called to do that we’re wondering whether we have the courage to do? Is there some situation where we’re wondering whether we have the time, or the finances, or the strength? Ruth would tell us to read the word of God and do it! Ruth would tell us to take that leap. After all, the author of Hebrews reminds us that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). The first lesson from Ruth, then, is that all of us have the ability to step out in faith, doing something (perhaps even difficult) that God has asked us to do.

II. **There is a second big idea I'd like us to get from the book of Ruth, and it's tied to the PROVIDENCE OF GOD, the behind-the-scenes care that God always seems to provide for his people.**

Now, there is not very much about God in this book, but it seems to me (looking back on this story with 20/20 hindsight) that God absolutely worked a number of things together so that we end the way we do – not that God caused everything to happen in this book, but looking back on it, it certainly seems that we see God's hand in the process. In fact, one of our senior saints asked for this lesson on Ruth specifically because this book “shows how God works.” And I would agree with that. We see God working in the book of Ruth.

We just so happen to have a famine, which causes Elimelech and Naomi to flee to Moab. We just so happen to have Ruth meet one of Naomi's sons and marrying into the family. Ruth makes the decision to go back to Bethlehem, and they just so happen to get there just in time for the barley harvest. God had already provided the system of gleaning to take care of the poor, and when Ruth gets involved, I want us to notice once again a key moment that we might have missed when we read it the first time. Notice, please, what happens in Ruth 2:3. In Ruth 2 (this chapter of WORKING), Ruth is jumping in to go glean some seemingly random field, and notice what the record says (in Ruth 2:3), ***“So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.”*** Do any of us think that Ruth just ***“happened”*** to start gleaning in this particular field? Certainly to Ruth, it might have SEEMED to be rather random at the time, but looking back on it, this is actually quite amazing! Of all the fields Ruth could have gleaned, she ***“happened”*** to go to this one! And the whole book is like this – some terrible things happen, but God seems to be working behind the scenes to ultimately accomplish his will in the world.

We cannot help but think about the book of Philemon in the New Testament. Philemon was apparently converted to Christianity by the apostle Paul, but he is a slave owner, and at some point, his slave (Onesimus) runs away and somehow runs into the apostle Paul, in prison, hundreds of miles away in Rome. Paul explains the gospel, he baptizes the young man, and then he sends him back. And in this brief one-page letter, Paul makes one of the most diplomatic heartfelt appeals ever written. He makes a play on words. The name Onesimus literally means “useful,” so he sends Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter explaining that this slave, once useless to Philemon has become USEFUL to Paul, and he is sending him back, in hopes that he can be USEFUL to Philemon again, but in a spiritual sense. And then we come to Philemon verses 15-16, where Paul says, ***“For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”*** I hope we understand what Paul is saying there. He is referring to a slave running away which in the Roman Empire would be a crime worthy of death. But looking back on it, Paul says ***“perhaps”*** this happened for a reason. I find it interesting that even as an inspired apostle, Paul does not come out and say, “God orchestrated this,” but he is certainly open to the possibility. Looking back on some situations, many of us can say the same thing, “Yes, that was a stressful time in my life, but it seems that God in some way got involved to help me through it.” The providence of God – not in a miraculous-manna-from-heaven kind of way, but in a behind-the-scenes kind of way.

In my own life, I think of that time when we moved into a new house down in Janesville, but we had almost no money for appliances. We lived for a while with a dorm-sized refrigerator sitting in the spot where the real refrigerator was supposed to go. Finally, we saved up enough for a fridge, and it came with a free ice-maker. We had never had an ice maker before, but we had no money to go get the parts to hook it up. I went to True Value and priced out the copper fittings and the tubing, and I came home and told Keola, “The next time we

have \$20 to spare, only then can we hook up the ice maker.” Well, we were kind of bummed, so I went outside to rake the leaves. It was in the fall of the year. As I was raking, something caught my eye, I looked down, and there was a \$20 bill laying right there in the pile of leaves! I ran inside and said, “God wants us to have an ice-maker!” I went back over to the hardware store, got the parts, fired up the torch, and installed it that very night. We joke about that sometimes. There is no way I can ever prove that God did that just to encourage us that day, but you know, with Paul and with Ruth, I can say “*perhaps.*” Looking back on it, it seems to me that yes, God was very much involved in our lives that afternoon.

One highlight of the last year for me has been hearing nearly all of you explain to the elders how you first came to hear about the Lord’s church – neighbors running into neighbors, seatmates on an airplane, someone at work with a Bible in his toolbox, seemingly random encounters – do we really think some of these things are random? Ruth, then, causes us to thank God for his care in our lives.

III. As we come near the end of our study, there is one more big lesson we need to take away from the book of Ruth, and that is: We need to appreciate this idea of a REDEEMER as a bit of foreshadowing pointing ultimately to the coming of Jesus as our redeemer.

In Ruth 4, Boaz redeems Ruth by purchasing from Naomi, the rights to all of the property formerly owned by their family, and Ruth (at her request, and according to God’s law) comes along with that. This was God’s way of making sure that widows were cared for.

Personally, when I think of redeeming something, two thoughts come to mind. First, I think of redeeming a coupon. When we redeem a coupon, in a sense, the store is buying back a piece of paper that they gave to us in the first place. It is theirs to give, they give it to us (either online or maybe in a newspaper or something), and then they buy it back in the form of giving us a discount. We purchase an item, and we pay for part of it by trading in this piece of paper. That coupon has been redeemed. It has been bought back.

The second scenario that comes to mind is what happens at a pawnshop. Let’s say I have something of value (a camera, an instrument, or whatever), but I’m having a hard time financially. I could just sell the item outright, but then the item is gone. At a pawnshop, they agree to hold it for a certain period of time, and if your situation improves in a few weeks, you can go in and buy it back. Of course, it will cost you something, but if the item is truly important, then there might be a value to this. Several years ago, we bought my wife a wedding ring at the pawnshop right over near Home Depot. She was working in food service, and couldn’t wear a ring with diamond on it, no engraving of any kind, so we needed a simple, yet comfortable, gold band. I’m assuming there is quite a story behind that ring, but for whatever reason, the rightful owner never came forward, which then gave us the opportunity to redeem it.

And in a sense, this is not only what Boaz did for Ruth, but this is what Jesus has done for us. Spiritually speaking, we are desperate, completely unable to save ourselves, so Jesus stepped in and paid the price for our freedom. As Paul says in Ephesians 1:7-8, “*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us.*” At the birth of his son John, Zacharias sang that song of praise to God and said, “*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people.*” Zacharias could see that redemption was right around the corner. And that redemption, by the way, was brought about by the great-great-great-great-grandson of Ruth and Boaz! And that is what we celebrate on the first day of every week, the fact that our freedom has been purchased. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:18-19, we conduct ourselves with fear during our stay on this earth, “*...knowing that [we] were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from [our] futile way of*

life inherited from =our forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ."

Conclusion:

And that is where we end our study of Ruth. Her story is our story in that we have been redeemed just as she was. And we give this invitation to everyone here this morning and to all who will eventually read or listen to this message online. God has paid the price for our sin, and we accept his free offer of salvation by repenting of sin, by having a change of heart, by making a decision to change our behavior, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus (the Son of God, the descendant of Ruth and Boaz) in baptism. If you would like to learn more, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can come talk with me as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com