



Faithful Ruth

August 17th | The Book of Ruth

This week in our Season of Saints we choose one of only two women who have Bible books named after them, Ruth. The other, Esther, was at the center of a great event, fraught with danger for the Jewish people, which eventually led to the establishment of one of the great festivals of the Jews, Purim. Ruth's story, though very moving, is not so dramatic. Her place in history most likely results from having a very famous great-grandson, King David.

Read Ruth 1:1-5.

- Trace what happens to Naomi in your own words. What's her family situation in verse one? What's her family situation in verse 5? How long does this all take to happen?¹
- Where does Naomi's family come from? Verse 2 names their clan and their city? Where else do these names crop up?²
- Naomi's daughters-in-law are Moabite women. The people of Israel were not supposed to intermarry with outsiders (although Moabites are not in the list of the 7 peoples of Canaan, and they are related to Israel, as descendants of Lot and his daughters), for fear of the wives turning the sons of Israel to the false gods of their people. Imagine the conversations of this devout family as their sons consider marrying Gentile wives. What promise might Mahlon and Chilion have made to their parents to get permission?³

Read Ruth 1:6-18

- There is a desperate poignancy to the telling of how these women leave Moab. They have no men, they are quite poor, it's obvious that Ruth and Orpah have cut off ties with their own families. Naomi has little hope of the journey back to Bethlehem, and no prospects of finding a husband for herself, much less the girls. Discuss what it feels like to be truly hopeless, to have no possible good plan to follow or outcome to aim for.⁴
- Orpah (Oprah Winfrey was named Orpah on her birth certificate, after Ruth's sister-in-law, but people consistently mispronounced and misspelled it Oprah, and that stuck) listens to Naomi's hopelessness and, sobbing, decides to follow Naomi's advice and return to her family and her gods. Does Naomi's bitter advice actually cost Orpah her salvation?⁵
- Until verse 14 nothing in the story distinguishes Ruth from Orpah. Both girls have been kind to Naomi and to "the dead." Both girls resist Naomi's first attempt to send them back. Both girls weep profusely. But finally Orpah goes and Ruth clings. The age-old theological question, "cur alia, non alii?," "why some, and not others?," is not answered here. We don't know "why Ruth, and not Orpah?" Discuss your own experience, perhaps within your family, of wondering why some believe and others don't.⁶
- Ruth's beautiful statement of faith deserves exploration. Notice that she specifically names Yahweh (the LORD, in small caps, discloses this in our English Bibles). Notice also that she

invokes a curse on herself if she breaks faithfulness with Naomi. The form, “May the LORD do so to me, and more also” is used often in the Bible, and is shorthand for naming all the terrible things He might do if the oath is broken. Later in the Bible it sometimes becomes, “May the LORD do so to my enemies, an interesting twist! Discuss the use of verses 16-17 as a wedding text.⁷

- Naomi, upon returning to Bethlehem, tells her old neighbors to call her by a different name. What is that name? What does Naomi mean, and what does the new name mean?⁸

Read Ruth 2

- The chapter starts with mention of Boaz as a relative of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech.⁹ What Biblical rule might seem to apply to the relative of the dead husband of a childless widow?¹⁰
- The practice of gleaning has Biblical laws surrounding it. What is the gist of God’s interest in gleaning?¹¹
- Boaz notices Ruth, and it’s obvious that he finds her interesting. There is no hint of sexual attraction in the telling of the story, but he definitely shows her special favor. How does he explain himself to Ruth when, in verses 8ff, he tells her to stick to his fields and drink from his workers’ water supply?¹²
- Boaz’s interest seems to grow. He goes so far as to invite her to eat, he gives her leftovers, and then gives what instruction to his reapers that really shows generosity?¹³
- Ruth returns to Naomi with quite a bit of wheat and lunch leftovers, enough to make sure they would not starve. When Ruth reports that this is the result of Boaz’s generosity, Naomi is very pleased. As a close relative, what role does Naomi name for Boaz? What do your study Bible notes say about this term, which in Hebrew is גֵּאֵל?¹⁴

Read Ruth 3

- Naomi now kicks into full Jewish mother gear! Perhaps she has been patiently waiting for something to develop for Ruth, with Boaz or another relative, but at wheat harvest she gives Ruth instructions. What does she tell Ruth to do?¹⁵
- What happens when Ruth follows instructions?¹⁶
- If this were a movie, perhaps a not-so-romantic not-so-comedy, there would be a plot complication at this point, and so there is. What’s the problem with Boaz redeeming Ruth?¹⁷

Read Ruth 4

- We are invited to observe a ritual now from about 1200 BC. Boaz goes to the gate of Bethlehem, waits for the closest relative of Elimelech, and talks as though he is Naomi’s agent discussing real estate. The closest relative is willing to redeem the land, but draws the line at Ruth. Why?¹⁸
- Verse 7 describes the taking off of the shoe as simply a way of attesting to the validity of the transaction, although Deuteronomy 25 seems to make it a way of shaming the one who refuses to redeem. When Boaz publicly announces his intention to redeem Ruth the Moabite, widow of

Mahlon, the community responds with a beautiful blessing that names Rachel, Leah, and Tamar. Why Tamar?¹⁹

- Happily ever after, Ruth bears Boaz a son, but Naomi takes over, perhaps literally nursing him (surprising, but medically possible, I've heard). The community says, "A son has been born to Naomi," perhaps foreshadowing the way that grandmothers often seem to think that the function of their children is to provide them with grandchildren! How does the genealogy that follows connect us up to this birth?²⁰

Wrap-up

- Ruth is a foreigner who is adopted by faith into the people of Israel.
- This book gives us an intimate look into the concept of Redeemer, one who is waiting to rescue in times of trouble, often from slavery and even death.
- We get an amazing look into the agricultural and community customs of people who lived well over 3,000 years ago when we open these pages. These people seem very real and alive when we read Ruth.

¹ Naomi enters Moab as a refugee from famine with a husband and two sons. Ten years later she is a widow, her two sons are dead, and she has two young widowed daughters-in-law.

² They are Ephrathites, which shows up in Micah 5:2, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah . . .", the great Messianic prophecy that Herod's advisors quote to the Wise Men. Bethlehem is the home of both King David and Jesus.

³ We don't know, of course, but since Orpah and Ruth start out telling Naomi that they will stick with her, implying they'll stick to her God, too, it seems likely that they faithfully promised to convert their wives rather than the other way around.

⁴ Answers will vary. If the class moves too quickly to, "But we have hope in Jesus," although this is correct, it might short-circuit exploring the real-life experience of not being able to see good outcomes. If so, direct the class back to discussing times when things *looked* hopeless, and what it felt like to be in that mindset, before finally discovering once again that our hope in Jesus does bear fruit.

⁵ We have to admit that it sure looks like this. Our actions have consequences. When we speak hopeless, bitter, complaining words there is the chance that our hearers will be infected with this poison. We really do need to be careful what we say! That doesn't mean we can't cry out in our pain, but we have to pay attention to who might be listening. Our example can be bad as well as good. God doesn't tell us the outcome of Orpah's life, and we are all ultimately responsible for our own actions, but certainly Naomi was not a good influence in this case.

⁶ Most people have examples they can share. Perhaps there is one sibling who is a faithful church member, while the other rejects God. Even among people who share the same genes there are often incredible differences.

⁷ It's definitely interesting that words spoken by a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law are used in the setting of the vows of a bride and groom! But isn't it true that we marry into a whole family, not just one person!

⁸ Mara, meaning "bitter," versus Naomi, meaning "pleasant." Nuff said!

⁹ The Hebrew word Elimelech means "my father is king."

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 25:5-10 describes Levirate marriage. If a man dies leaving no children, his brother is to marry the widow for the purpose of preserving the dead man's inheritance. Judah's son Er died, his brother Onan went through the motions of marrying the widow Tamar, but "spilled his seed," which the Lord in turn punished with death, and so Judah, having lost two sons, was afraid to marry Tamar to his youngest. This is the earliest mention of this custom, which then is spelled out as law in Dt. 25. It could happen that the brother might feel this would mess up his own inheritance and refuse, in which case there is a public ceremony to shame him. However, there is some question whether this would apply to Naomi, since she had actually already raised two sons to adulthood. And we don't know whether Elimelech had brothers, only that Boaz was a relative. This law will show up later in the book.

¹¹ Gleaning is God's Welfare program. The poor were allowed to pick up the wheat or other crops that fell to the ground as the harvesters were reaping. Imagine gathering a bundle of wheat stalks in your arms and tying them together into a sheaf with a piece of straw. Some stalks would fall to the ground. The harvesters were not to pick them up, but were to leave them for the poor to gather. In Central Florida perhaps this would equate to oranges ripening late on trees that have already been picked commercially.

¹² Boaz tells her that he is impressed by the story of how she has been faithful to Naomi. His words also imply indirectly that he is pleased that she has become a believer in Yahweh, and he invokes a blessing of the LORD on her.

¹³ Pull out some of the wheat stalks from their sheaves for her! In other words, reap sloppily so there's more for Ruth to pick up!

¹⁴ Redeemer, גֹּאֵל (pronounced like "go ale" and transliterated go'el) in Hebrew, is the Israelite term for the relative who is obligated to step in to rescue in times of dire need. For example, a redeemer might buy a person back out of slavery when one's poverty has reduced one to selling oneself as a slave. This is the term used in Job's famous words, which we sing in our hymn, "I know that my Redeemer lives." Leviticus 25:48-49 gives the order in which the nearest relative is considered the go'el in the case of redeeming a slave: brother, uncle, male cousin and then other relatives. Boaz is somewhere down this line, as we later learn there is a closer relative than him.

¹⁵ Go to the threshing floor when the celebration is winding down. When Boaz and the others are pretty merry and finally lie down, Ruth is to go uncover his feet and lie down by him.

¹⁶ Boaz at some point in the night is awakened by his cold feet. The Hebrew in verse 8 conveys his surprise these 3000+ years later! Whether Naomi specifically told Ruth to say her spiel is not recorded, but Ruth definitely proposes to Boaz, asking him to serve as go'el. Boaz is pleased—Ruth is young, he's not so, and he's definitely flattered that she asks him.

¹⁷ There is one closer relative. Apparently Boaz can't, or prefers not to, simply say, "I've decided to marry Ruth." Perhaps it would complicate her inheritance if he doesn't specifically marry her as go'el (the following chapter hints at this). So Boaz needs to talk to the nearest relative and give him the chance at Elimelech's inheritance and Ruth.

¹⁸ He is concerned about his own inheritance. Raising up children by her somehow complicates that. We see this objection come up in the Tamar story referred to earlier.

¹⁹ The Ephrathites trace their lineage through Judah's union with Tamar and their younger twin, Perez. This story connects up with the Levirate marriage, although in a strange way, and also in the sense of the older man marrying the younger woman.

²⁰ These names show up again in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke (Luke adding a couple of names in his list). Ruth is great great . . . grandma to Jesus. So is Tamar, by the way—these are two of the three women named (plus one more mentioned but not named) who are listed as ancestors of Jesus.