

Introduction to the Book of Ruth: *Loving-kindness in dark times*

Christina Keith 2023

Opening

Hello everyone. My name's Chris Keith. I'm a KYB leader, and it's my privilege to present this introduction to the book of Ruth.

It's been said that the best way to read the Bible is back to front. In other words, we should let what we learn from the back part of the Bible, the New Testament, shed light on what we read in the front part – the Old Testament. And this is particularly so in the book of Ruth. In fact, this story should mean more to us than it did to its original readers, because we know the true ending of the book. Ruth is a story with eternal consequences. And as we read it, we'll see that its true significance is found in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named after women. The other one is Esther. Both are in the Old Testament, and both tell of faithful, godly, courageous women, who are used by God to change the course of history.

Ruth has been described as one of the most beautiful short stories of all time. It's the true account of Elimelek, a farmer from Bethlehem, his wife Naomi, their two sons and their Moabite wives: Ruth and Orpah. And it also involves the intervention of another man, a respected landowner in Bethlehem, named Boaz.

Now this story takes us through a rollercoaster of events that happened to this ordinary family during one of the darkest periods in Israel's history.

This is a love story, but it's a love story in the truest sense of the word. The Hebrew word '*hesed*' describes the loving-kindness of God. And although the word '*hesed*' only occurs three times in the book, the whole narrative is filled with loving-kindness. We see Naomi's loving-kindness to her daughters-in-law; we hear of Ruth and Orpah's loving-kindness to their husbands; we see Ruth's loving-kindness to her mother-in-law; and we see Boaz's loving-kindness to both Ruth and Naomi.

But above all, Ruth is a story that shows the loving-kindness of God. It's a story of hope; a story of promise, a story that sheds light on the loving, sovereign, hand of the Lord as he puts in place one more piece in his great rescue plan. This is a plan that began before the foundation of the world; a plan to save people from every tribe and language and nation and bring them into relationship with God.

And it's a story that can be a great comfort to us when we go through difficult times. Because in this narrative we see God working out his good purposes, in his way, for his glory – even in the midst of terrible suffering and heartbreak.

And in the New Testament, Romans 8:28 reminds us: *'that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose'*.

Now some of us will be quite familiar with this account of Ruth, while others have a treat in store as events unfold in this short narrative. But whether we're familiar with the story or not, as we read and study this book, let's look beneath the surface to discern our great God at work fulfilling his purposes in the lives of those who seek to live in obedience to him.

The author

Now you may be wondering who wrote the book of Ruth. Jewish tradition says that the prophet Samuel wrote down this story in order to justify David, who's mentioned at the end of the book, becoming King after Saul. However, Samuel died before David came to the throne, so that sheds some doubt on whether the author actually was Samuel. So, it's probably best not to speculate and to simply leave the name of this skilled storyteller, as 'Unknown'.

The setting

However, we don't need to speculate about the setting for this book because it's written down for us. The story opens:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion.

Now there's a lot of detail there in these opening verses. Right at the beginning we're given the historical setting of this book. We're told that the story takes place in the days when the judges ruled. Now the judges probably ruled Israel for over 400 years, and scholars think that the events in this narrative took place toward the end of the period of the judges, which would be around 1100 BC. So let me just set that period in its biblical context.

The biblical context

Way back in the Garden of Eden the perfect world that God has made is tainted by sin as Adam and Eve rebel against God's Word. And from then on people are separated from the perfect relationship with God that was there at the beginning. Yet God does not give up on his creation; he has a rescue plan. A plan to bring people back to himself. And in Genesis 12:1-3 we see God making a promise to a man called Abraham.

God calls Abraham and promises to bless him and his descendants and make them into a great nation. Not only that, God also promises that the whole world will be blessed through this nation. Now Abraham and his wife Sarah have no children and are well past child-bearing age. Yet God enables Sarah to miraculously conceive and bear a son Isaac. Isaac subsequently grows up and has a son called Jacob. Jacob is given the name Israel, and he has twelve sons. And they live in the land of Canaan.

During a great famine in Canaan, the Israelites, as they are now known, seek refuge in Egypt, because there's food there. They live freely in Egypt for some time, multiplying in number and becoming a great nation. But eventually they become slaves of the Egyptians. Then after 400 years, God raises up a leader called Moses; and God uses Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the desert, heading back to the land of Canaan – the land God promised to give to Abraham.

Now during the time that they're in the desert, God makes a pledge or covenant with his people at Mt Sinai. God has brought them out of Egypt, and he's brought them to himself. The Israelites are God's chosen people, and God calls them 'his treasured possession'. Don't you love that – 'his treasured possession'. And there at Mt Sinai God promises to bless them if they follow him. And the people pledge to do this. (You can read about it in Exodus 19.)

Joshua then leads the people into the Promised Land, where the Israelites once again promise to follow the Lord. However, sadly, after the death of Joshua, the people fail to live according

to these covenant promises. And it doesn't take long before problems arise. At this time Israel is just a loose confederation of tribal groups and the people quickly fall into sin and corruption. And enemy nations begin to attack them.

So God raises up leaders called 'judges' to help deal with the enemies, to settle disputes and bring the people back to righteous living. But despite some periods where the Israelites repent and turn back to God, their disobedience spirals ever downwards.

The book of Judges ends with this very sad verse: '*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit*'. Everyone just pleased themselves and did what they wanted to do. And so we see the need for Israel to have some centralised form of government; to have a King, who will rule over Israel and unify the nation and bring the people back to God – their true King.

Turn the page in the Bible and we come to the book of Ruth. At the end of the book of Ruth we will see that one day Israel *will* have a king, the great King David, the man after God's own heart. And – spoiler alert! – the Moabite Ruth will be his great-grandmother. And God will make another covenant with King David – *that his house and his kingdom will **endure for ever before God*** (and that's found in 2 Samuel 7:16). In this covenant, we get a glimpse of God's eternal King – King Jesus – who will come from the lineage of David. Through this King, God will redeem people from every nation, just as he promised so long ago to Abraham.

And the book of Ruth gives us a link between the two covenant periods in the life of the nation of Israel. And it's part of the big picture of God's great plan of salvation, his rescue plan, that begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation.

The book of Ruth shines as a ray of hope in this period of Israel's history. And it shows that despite the disobedience of so many around them, there is still a remnant of God's people who remain faithful to the Lord and follow in his ways.

And as believers today, we can see that despite living in a world that by and large has turned its back on God, we too are called to remain faithful to the Lord and follow in his ways.

Elimelek's family

Now let's look at Elimelek's family. One of the fascinating things about this short narrative is that it's almost written in the form of a drama, with the scenes changing quite quickly. It doesn't have many characters, but it does have plenty of dialogue to move the story along. And in this first scene we're introduced to the family of Elimelek.

The family of Elimelek come from Bethlehem in Judah. Now the name 'Bethlehem' means 'house of bread' but sadly as this story opens, there is no bread in Bethlehem. The fields are barren, the crops have failed. There's famine in the land. And Elimelek takes his wife and two sons to live in the nearby country of Moab.

Now we don't know why Elimelek, whose name means 'My God is King' chooses to leave the land of 'God his King' to travel east across the Jordan River to Moab. Because the Moabites are traditional enemies of the people of Israel, and the Israelites had been warned not to associate with them.

But here we see Elimelek desperate for food to feed his family, leaving Bethlehem and going to Moab. Now while in the land of Moab things do not go well for Elimelek's family. First, Elimelek himself dies. Then Mahlon and Kilion marry Moabite women, who come from

households that do not worship the true and living God. Then, Mahlon and Kilion both die, leaving their wives, Ruth and Orpah, as childless widows.

So, at the end of this first scene, we see three women suffering incredible loss with dire prospects for the future. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are all alone with no one to support them, no one to protect them.

The return to Bethlehem

Now we move to the second scene. Finally, after ten years in Moab, Naomi hears that there is once more food in Bethlehem, so she and her daughters-in-law set out to go to Judah. But somewhere between Moab and Bethlehem, Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to go back to the security of their family homes, so that there they might find another husband to take care of them.

Orpah, although grieved at leaving Naomi, chooses to return to the safety of her family home and we hear no more about her. But Ruth makes the decision to cut all ties with her family, to cut all ties with Moab and its idols, and to go to Bethlehem with Naomi. And in an amazing declaration, Ruth places her security and all her future in the hands of Naomi's God – Yahweh, the God of Israel. Her response is wholehearted and it's probably one of the best-known parts of this book. Ruth declares to Naomi:

.....where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where 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. (Ruth 1:16b-17)

What a declaration...and what a challenge! And I think each one of us has to ask: Where is my security? Have I submitted completely to the mercy and loving-kindness of the Lord, no matter what difficulties may have come into my life?

So Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem, arriving just as the barley harvest is beginning. And in the next scene the storyteller introduces us to an influential man in Bethlehem named Boaz. And when we hear that Boaz is a relative of Elimelek, we realise that something exciting is about to happen.

Now I'm not going to spoil the whole story by telling you everything that happens next! But let me just point out a few explanations that may help us as we study this book. The first is the law of gleaning.

Gleaning

When Ruth arrives in Bethlehem, she doesn't just sit around, she sets about finding food for herself and Naomi. So she goes to the fields to glean.

In Leviticus 19:9-10 God gives the Israelites a law that clearly shows his loving-kindness to the poor and the marginalised. He says:

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. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.

This is the law of gleaning. It allows the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the foreigners to find food, and it's a wonderful provision for Ruth and Naomi.

Chance happenings?

Now throughout the story we'll notice a few things that may seem like chance happenings or co-incidences. However, when we look back, we can see they are really God working through the everyday occurrences in the lives of his people, achieving his purposes for them. The word that describes this, is a word we don't hear very much these days. It's the word 'providence'.

So when Ruth goes to work in nearby fields to get grain, she 'just happens' to go to the field belonging to Elimelek's relative Boaz. That's providence. The first day Ruth comes to glean, Boaz 'just happens' to come from the town to see his workers. That's providence. And Boaz 'just happens' to ask who the foreign woman is gleaning in his fields. And so he's introduced to Ruth. That's providence – God at work in the lives of his faithful people.

Guardian-redeemer

When Naomi hears that Ruth has gleaned in the fields of Boaz she exclaims: '*That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers*'. (Ruth 2:20b). A redeemer is someone who rescues a person who's in a helpless situation. A situation that they can't get out of by themselves. So, for example, in those days, you could redeem or buy back a person who has been sold as a slave. And a *guardian-redeemer* is a close relative who is willing to buy the land of a dead family member and marry his widow (if there is one) so that the family land is not lost, and the family name is preserved.

If we read our Bibles back to front, then we know that Jesus is our Redeemer. We cannot rescue ourselves from our helpless, sinful state. Yet Jesus willingly paid the price so he could redeem us by his precious blood and bring us into his forever family.

At the threshing floor

In chapter 3 of this story, Ruth goes to the threshing floor. A farmer would take his grain to the threshing floor after it'd been harvested. Then he'd get rid of the unwanted chaff around the grain by tossing it into the air with a pitchfork. The breeze would then blow the chaff away and the heavier grain would fall to the floor. This was mostly done at night when the breezes were more prevalent.

One night, Naomi sees an opportunity for Ruth to let their guardian-redeemer, Boaz, know that she's available for marriage. Naomi knows that Boaz will be at the threshing floor that night. So, she tells Ruth to prepare herself and to go and lie down at his feet when he's asleep. It seems that asking a man to spread his garment over her – as happens here – was a customary way for a woman to request marriage. Although this is a risky thing for Ruth to do, in this narrative our attention is drawn to the complete purity of Ruth, the Moabite widow, and the utter trustworthiness of Boaz, her guardian-redeemer.

Conclusion

Ruth is an amazing story that tells of the loving-kindness of our great God in a dark period of Israel's history. It's a story that begins with famine and ends with fulfilment. It's a story that begins with despair and poverty and ends with delight and plenty. It's a story that largely centres around the town of Bethlehem. And it's a story that clearly points us to Jesus, our Redeemer, who one day would come to earth and be born as a baby in that very same town.

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