

SESSION TWENTY – SEVEN

RUTH: A GLIMMER OF GRACE

Ruth 1—4

(Subtitle: "What's a Nice Moabite Girl Like You Doing in Bethlehem?")

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Ruth is actually another appendix to the book of Judges, for it reflects an episode occurring during this period of Israel's history:

"Now it came about in the days when the judges governed . . ." (1:1)

We are not told the author of the book, but possibly Samuel wrote it.¹ Since Ruth, the main character of the book, lived only three generations before David, the book must be in the latter part of the period of the judges. The book ends with the genealogy that culminates with David, the greatest king of Israel's history and the one through whom the Messiah-king would come (2 Sam 7). But the purpose of the book is not merely to show the link between David and his genealogy (though it certainly does trace the ancestry of David back to Judah and Bethlehem). The book is loaded with theology, particularly the sovereignty of God and how (and upon whom) He works out His faithfulness.

II. OBSERVATIONS

To grasp the theology offered in this book, one must make several key observations:

A. The Historical Setting

As has been mentioned, the event occurs during the period of the judges. This was a time when the nation was frequently being disciplined by the LORD. In fact, the book of Ruth begins this way " . . . *there was a famine in the land*" (1:1), a fact reflecting God's discipline upon them (Deut 28:17-18, 38-40). The fact that Naomi and her family are leaving the land to dwell in Moab reflects a lack of covenant faithfulness on their part, especially when Naomi's two sons take Moabite wives (cf. Ex 34:12-16; Deut 7:1-5).

The connection with Bethlehem, however, must not be overlooked, for Elimelech was a man of Bethlehem. Merrill notes that Bethlehem has already had a connection to the "days of the judges," particularly in the epilogue sections. In both Judges 17–18 as well as 19–21, departures from Bethlehem had tragic outcomes. In this case, however, tragedy is overturned. Merrill writes, "Saul's ancestors had humiliated and disgraced a Bethlehemite, much to their chagrin to be sure, but Bethlehem not only survived this but went on to produce Saul's successor, the man after God's own heart."² As we begin a reading of Ruth, we might (once

¹*Baba Bathra* 14b reads, "Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book [sing.] of Judges and Ruth" (D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* [Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1977], 5, n 3).

²Eugene H. Merrill, "The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142:566 (Apr-Jun 1985), 133.

again) expect something tragic to happen in regard to Bethlehem. This time, however, we are in for a pleasant surprise.

B. Numerous Invocations of Blessings

Throughout the book, numerous invocations for blessings are offered. These are actually prayers to YHWH. The book revolves around these prayers as God graciously works out the requests, thereby extending His blessing. The key invocations can be found in 1:8-9, 2:12, 2:20, 3:10, and 4:11-12.

C. The Term *hesed* (חֶסֶד)

The term *hesed* is found three times in the book (1:8, 2:20, and 3:10). The *NASB* and *KJV* translate the term as "kindness", but the word means much more than a kind act or attitude. *hesed* is much more than an emotion. The idea of loyalty and faithfulness is very much inherent in the word, as well as the influence of love. *hesed* is that outworking or display of one's love that stems from a loyal commitment to the object of one's love. The idea of "loyal-love" is much more fundamental to the meaning of the term.

Thus, Naomi invokes YHWH to show His *hesed* i.e., his loyal-love to Ruth (1:8). Of course, this is exactly what transpires throughout the book, especially by the culmination in ch 4. But along the way, we see Ruth displaying *hesed* (3:10) and Boaz displaying *hesed* (2:20).

D. The Term "Redeem" (גָּאָל)

This Hebrew root occurs as a verb (3:13 & 4:4,6), as a participle (2:20; 3:9, 12; 4:1,3,6,8,14) and as a noun (4:6,7). This word should be a key word study. This word explains Boaz's dealings with Ruth and even illustrates one facet of Christ's work on the cross as it relates to redemption.

Primarily, the word means to "redeem" or act as a "kinsman redeemer". The latter idea was a popular cultural concept in Israel in which a near relative had certain obligations to his kinsman. For instance, the kinsman-redeemer might marry the widow of a family member: under the law of inheritance, if a widow was left without children, the next of kin had the right to marry her (cf. Ruth 3:12, 13; 4:1) and raise up a seed for the family name. Also, land was to stay in the family (according to the Law), so that it would not fall into the hands of a few or pass to another tribe. Land that had to be sold (e.g., because of poverty) had to eventually be returned to the family. If land was sold, the kinsman-redeemer could buy back the land sold by his relative (this explains Ruth 4:4,6). There were a number of practices in which a human could redeem something or act as "kinsman-redeemer." In the book of Ruth, this was two-fold: (1) Naomi had a piece of land to be sold and which needed to be redeemed by a family member (4:3) and (2) since Ruth was a widow of an Israelite man, a near-kin needed to marry her and raise up children for the sake of her husband. These opportunities had to be offered to the closest kin first (4:3ff). He could refuse and then the opportunity would go to the next closest (in this case Boaz). This becomes an intriguing story in the book of Ruth, because Ruth had been barren for 10 years with her first husband (1:4). Any man who married her would have to face the fact that he might not ever have children to receive his inheritance (see 4:6—this is why the closest relative refused). For Boaz, to marry Ruth was a great step of faith, but he was a man marked by family-loyalty. Because he fulfilled his responsibility in faith, God highly rewarded him. Ironically, the closest relative passed up the opportunity to take Ruth as a wife for fear of losing any posterity. Little did he realize that his posterity could have included David!

In brief, the *gō'el* (kinsman-redeemer) may be described as the protector or defender of the interests of the family (Lev 25; Num 35). As appears from the story in Ruth, the obligations of the *gō'el* were voluntary, not obligatory. The *gō'el* could renege on his duties, but to do so would be to fail to exercise *hesed* and undoubtedly carry with it disgrace in the eyes of the clan (cf. Deut 25:9-10; Ruth 4:7).

These concepts lay the foundation for our understanding of Christ as "kinsman-redeemer". He was the near kinsman for Israel who made the payment for sin to release His people from the consequences of sin. As we enter into relationship with Him, He looks after and protects our interests (e.g., chastisement upon our enemies).

III. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

God's grace being sovereignly bestowed
in response to prayer
and through the faithful acts of faithful people.

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOOK³

A. Chapter One

The book begins with Israel experiencing discipline from YHWH in the form of a famine (1:1). The family of Elimelech tries to avert the discipline by fleeing to Moab (an unfaithful act). The two sons of the family marry foreign women, in this case Moabite women of whom Ruth is one. However, Elimelech and his two sons die in Moab, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law all alone.

Naomi's interpretation of the situation is to view her plight as God's judicial punishment: "the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me" (1:13; cf. 1:20, 21). She is now a bitter old woman (see the Hebrew in 1:13—"it is bitter for me"), and her emptiness is not having a husband or sons (1:5). She knows she has no prospect for children (1:11), and she knows she is too old for a husband (thus she cannot raise up new husbands for her two-daughters-in-law).

Nevertheless, she hears the word that "the LORD had visited His people in giving them food." (1:6). This is the word *pāqad* (פָּקַד), a covenant term; the point is that God is now blessing His people again. So she heads back in hope.

On the way, however, she seeks to turn the daughters-in-law away. The key is the invocation she offers in 1:8-9 - (1) that the LORD might show *hesed* to them and (2) that they might find "rest" in gaining a new marriage. Throughout, the book we can observe these prayers being fulfilled through the acts of faithful individuals. Ruth does experience the answered prayer, for she is the one who did not turn away from Naomi. She begins to experience God's *hesed* by happening upon Boaz who is gracious to her (note: 2:20). In 3:1 Naomi takes action to find "rest" for Ruth, and this comes to fruition by marriage in 4:13.

³For an insightful analysis of the plot, see Reg Grant, "Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (Oct-Dec 1991): 424-41.

Thus, God begins to overcome the situation that Naomi is just a bitter old woman. He resolves her dilemma:

- (1) In 3:17, Boaz sends grain with Ruth so that she will not go back empty-handed to Naomi.
- (2) In 4:14, YHWH has not left Naomi without a *gō'el* - there is a new one, the seed, who will be a *gō'el* to Naomi.
- (3) 4:15 - Her faithful daughter-in-law is worth more than 7 sons.

B. Chapter Two

As chapter two opens, Ruth is attempting to provide for Naomi by picking up the leftover grain from the harvest fields, a practice permitted of the poor according to the Law (Lev 19:9-10). When we encounter Boaz, we see that he is a man who loves the LORD and lives by Torah. He has a spiritual concern for the reapers who work in his fields (2:4), and even the reapers invoke blessing on Boaz.

When Boaz discovers Ruth and takes notice of her faithfulness to Naomi in seeking to provide for her, he invokes a blessing upon Ruth that the LORD bless and reward Ruth for seeking refuge "under the wings" of YHWH Elohim, the God of Israel (2:12). He realizes that she is a Moabitess; but by faith in coming with Naomi, Ruth has sought to identify herself with the God of Israel. Boaz prays that God will honor that step of faith. And of course this prayer will be answered. Ruth's faith is rewarded, and even Boaz becomes part of the answer.

Boaz gives her special privileges and makes provision for her (2:14-16). When Ruth returns to Naomi, Naomi rejoices and invokes a blessing on Boaz; that the LORD would bless him for his display of *hesed* (2:20). That is, Boaz is a relative of the family and he acts in loving-loyalty to care for them.

C. Chapter Three

This chapter centers around the appearance of Ruth to Boaz at night, just before he goes to sleep. Ruth comes with an appeal: "spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative (Lit., a *gō'el* - kinsman-redeemer)." This was not a request to have sex, as some have thought, but a request that Boaz act the part of the kinsman-redeemer and take Ruth for his wife. She did this at the instruction of Naomi, and this is an obedient act of faith for it would bring blessing to Naomi. Boaz perceives that Ruth is indeed acting in loving-loyalty to Naomi. Ruth could have sought out any man for a husband but she acts in faith to follow the will of YHWH (as revealed in Torah) to abide by the Levirate marriage custom of the kinsman-redeemer. This is not only a display of loyalty to Naomi (who would benefit by the marriage to a kinsman-redeemer) but it is also a display of faith and submission to YHWH, the God under whose wings she had sought refuge.

Boaz correctly perceives this and invokes a prayer of blessing on Ruth, that the LORD would bless her for her display of *hesed*, i.e., loyal-love. This is a clue to the theme of the book:

1:8 - May YHWH show *hesed*

2:20 - the *hesed* of Boaz

3:10 - the *hesed* of Ruth

Naomi had prayed for YHWH to show *hesed* (loving-loyalty) to Ruth. And, of course, He does (as we see in ch 4). But along the way, we see two people who also have *hesed*. YHWH

brings His *hesed*, but it involves the faithful acts of individuals - it is through this that God works and answers prayer.

D. Chapter Four

There is one problem standing in the way. Before Boaz can act as the kinsman-redeemer, the opportunity must first be offered to the nearest kin. The big question, however, is whether or not he will do so, knowing that Ruth had been barren for 10 years by her first husband. If he marries Ruth, and no children result, then the man would have no posterity and the inheritance would be jeopardized. Consequently, the man chose to pass up the opportunity. The "gate," by the way (4:1), was the gate of the city where public transactions were carried out.

Boaz then agrees to be the kinsman-redeemer and marry Ruth, and as such he acts in faithfulness to the family interests. As a result, there is another invocation in 4:11-12. The invocation is two-fold: the first is that Ruth would be like Rachel and Leah, i.e., that Ruth would be fertile and give birth to a family. The second is for Boaz's genealogy to be like that of his ancestor Perez (who was a son of Judah and a non-Israelite mother—Gen 38). The significance of this is that Boaz does become famous by being associated with the genealogy of David.

As the book closes, we observe the invocation of 4:11-12 being answered in the genealogy which included David, the great king of Israel and the one from whose house the Messiah would come. Yet, the point is not just to provide the genealogy. The book clarifies that behind the invocation of 4:11-12 lay the faithful acts of faithful people. God's sovereignty worked through those faithful acts in the everyday life of people.

The way in which this is handled, however, provides a classic touch of irony. We should note that both the invocation for Boaz in 4:12 ("*may your house be like the house of Perez*") and the final genealogy (which begins with Perez—see 4:18) are used to call our attention to Perez. Of what significance is this to the Book of Ruth? Plenty, if we recall Abraham's intense concern that marriage remain in the family and within the land (Gen 24). Perez was another case, like Ruth's, where the expectation is broken. Grant explains:

Thus David is seen to be the product of the union of an Israelite (Boaz) with a foreigner (Ruth). What Abraham feared would disallow the inheritance was used by God to secure it.

. . . . The lineage that leads to David began with Perez, the illegitimate son of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38:29). Tamar was almost certainly a Canaanite who, like Ruth, married into the covenant community (v. 6). Posing as a prostitute (v. 14), she seduced Judah because he had not fulfilled his levirate responsibility to her. The focus on levirate responsibility is clear in Ruth. Equally clear is the contrast between "the-end-justifies-the-means" attitude of Tamar and the purity of Ruth, as well as the lechery of Judah over against the dignity and self-control of Boaz. The author prepared his audience for a heightened sense of contrast between these two pairs in the way he recorded the night meeting of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 3).

The provocative imagery in Ruth 3 combines with the reference to Perez in 4:18 to reinforce not only the contrast between Judah/Tamar and Ruth/Boaz, but also to widen the gulf between the expectations of man and the ways of the Lord. Who would have expected the Lord to include the illegitimate product of a sinful union of a Jew and an

ostensibly Canaanite prostitute in the messianic line? The historical parallels actually serve to heighten the contrasts.⁴

The link with Judah (by way of Perez) is important to the Davidic line (which possesses the Davidic covenant promises of an eternal throne-kingdom), because it was to Judah that the royal promise was made in Gen 49:10—"*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his*" (NIV). The link between Judah and David, however, is graced by two unusual women.

Obviously, one's physical connection to Abraham is not the ultimate criteria for one's spiritual relationship with the LORD (or His blessing upon them). In a most ironic way, we are made to see that the faithful acts of people who honor God in their lives override what we might expect in relation to their background and origin. Even Boaz is a surprise: he should not have been the ancestor of David (and Jesus!), because the other Hebrew man had first-right to marry Ruth. Boaz, however, obtains the honor, because he honors the biblical custom of levirate marriage and takes the responsibility of kinsman-redeemer. In so doing, God honors him.

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

The closest relative should have been more faithful to the family interests and married Ruth. Had he acted in faith (and it would take faith, for Ruth was barren) he would have had the greatest posterity possible. Unbelief often lets great reward go by unclaimed!

⁴Grant, 438; cf. Merrill, 133-35.