

LESSONS FROM RUTH

The time between Passover and the Feast of Pentecost in the land of Israel it is the time of the barley harvest that goes from Passover to Pentecost. It is significant that barley is the crop used to symbolise not only Jesus Christ but the church as well. Barley is adaptable to a greater range of climate than any other cereal. It is able to grow and ripen in a shorter time than any other cereal and it has greater resistance to dry heat than other small grains. Some scholars also see a parallel between the seven weeks of the barley harvest and the seven church eras.

The Jews traditionally read a particular book on the Feast of Pentecost because of its connection with the barley harvest and that is the Book of Ruth. It is a book whose story typifies the way that Jesus Christ both redeems and loves His church. In this article I would like to take a look at this wonderful love story and draw out a few lessons that we can learn from it.

Before we dive let's set the scene with a little background information. The Book of Ruth was set in the time of the Judges. If you go to the last two verses of the book of Ruth, chapter 4, verses 21 and 22 you will see that Ruth and Boaz were the parents of Obed who was the father of Jesse who was the father of King David. Ruth was the great grandmother of King David. Now King David was born about 1040 BC so this would place the story of Ruth and Boaz around 1100 BC.

Now those who try and work out the chronology of the book of Judges believe that a number of the later Judges ruled parallel to each other. Around the same time as Ruth, Eli was judge in Shiloh in the central mountains of Israel. Another famous character appears to also be judging part of Israel at the same time and that was Samson in the south west of Israel. Let's now start at the beginning of the book. I'll summarise the first few verses.

There is a man by the name Elimelech from Bethlehem of the tribe of Judah. A bad famine strikes the land and much like Abraham did during a similar famine he went to a foreign land seeking food. He takes his wife, Naomi and his two sons to Moab.

All 3 men of the household die and the only ones left are Naomi, now a widow and the widows of her two sons, Orpah (not to be confused with Oprah) and Ruth. They are Moabites. Some people mistakenly believe that Ruth was of a different race but it has to be remembered that the Moabites were descended from Abraham's nephew Lot and one of his daughters. It notes here that they were in Moab for 10 years. Depending on when into those 10 years Ruth married her first husband she was probably somewhere between her mid 20's and mid 30's at the end of her time in Moab when Naomi decides to head back home after hearing there is no famine in Judah. Let's pick up the story Ruth 1 and verse 7:

"So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they

may become your husbands? [skipping down to verse 14] Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "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." And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. [Dropping down to verse 22] "So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest."

Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law were all widows with nobody to provide for them. They had nothing. They certainly didn't have anything back in Israel. They had no land in Israel because they sold it seen by the need of someone to redeem that land later in the story. Notice the different reactions of Orpah and Ruth. Orpah was kissing her goodbye, but Ruth grabbed her and would not let her go. Orpah's name means neck. It is fitting, because Orpah looked back to her old society and to her pagan gods. It is reminiscent of Lot's wife, who looked back when they had to flee.

Ruth said: "Wherever you go, I will go; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." What a declaration of loyalty! Ruth's association with Naomi's family led her to want Naomi's God to be her God. It seems apparent in this verse that God is calling her. God has a plan for Ruth and He doesn't want her to stay back in Moab. He wants her to go with Naomi. Naomi must have set an incredible example for Ruth in how she conducted her life.

The first major lesson here that I would like to draw our attention to is that of Ruth's love and loyalty.

The name Ruth means friend or companion and Ruth was certainly that to her mother in law, Naomi. Let's look at a proverb that speaks of the kind of loyalty that Ruth displayed over in Proverbs 17:17. Here in Proverbs 17:17 we read: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity".

We all want friends who are loyal to us, friends we can trust and rely on. No one wants a fair weather friend who disappears at the first sign of trouble or personal inconvenience. Loyalty means supporting a friend in difficulty as well as prosperity. Adversity truly reveals the depth of friendship. Adversity is not just those catastrophic happenings of life and death when many rally around, but also those deep waters that only a few know we are passing through. We all want friends like that but how good are we at being a loyal friend to others and to God when the chips are down and what they need from us may be inconvenient?

Ruth and Naomi arrived back in Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest. In Deuteronomy 24:19 it says: "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 stranger, the fatherless, and the widow." Ruth was a stranger and both of them were widows. They had a legitimate claim to the gleanings of the field but they had to work for those gleanings.

In chapter 2 we'll pick up the story in verse 3: "So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz,

who was of the clan of Elimelech. [Dropping down to verse 5] Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?” And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, “She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.’ So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.”

“Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.” Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” But Boaz answered her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” [Dropping further down to verse 17] So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.”

Ruth worked all day long and the indication is that she gathered in over thirty pounds of barley in one day.

This brings us to the second major lesson that I’d like to draw out in the story of Ruth and that is her wonderful work ethic which is something we should admire and emulate.

It’s reminiscent of what it says in Proverbs 31:15 where it says: “She rises while it is yet dark and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens.” That’s certainly something we men admire about our ladies when it comes to our church potluck meals. Boaz has great respect and admiration for her character and the way that she supported her mother in law which had been talked about in the local community.

It is interesting to note here that Boaz did not just give her grain. While the generosity of Boaz couldn’t be earned, she still had to work to receive the benefit of that gift, which obviously has application for us as that is just like God’s offer of salvation for us. There is no way we can ever earn the gift of salvation but we have to work hard to receive the blessing at the end of the day or work out our own salvation as Paul puts it. We are to be daily overcoming our human nature, becoming more spiritual rather than carnal.

Now the third major lesson in the story I’d like to draw out from the book of Ruth is how God turned around a situation of seeming hopelessness for Naomi and Ruth through the redemption that He worked out through Boaz.

Even though the famine has ended in Israel look at the despair in Naomi’s heart when he arrives back in Bethlehem in verses 20 and 21 of chapter 1: “She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Have we sometimes felt like that? That life is bitter and God is actively working against our hopes and dreams in this life. I know I have at times and even fairly recently if I am honest. Naomi's attitude starts to change after Ruth brings home a significant amount of grain after gleaning in the field of Boaz.

In chapter 2, verse 19 we read: "And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz." And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers."

Naomi connects the dots. Naomi is overjoyed, because she realizes that Boaz is a close relative of her dead husband, Elimelech. Boaz could redeem both the family name and redeem the land that they sold during the famine. A few verses later at the end of chapter 2 it says that Ruth "kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests." The wheat harvest ended close to the Feast of Tabernacles so a few months go by and then Naomi in the next chapter decides to play match maker in a way that is a lot different to today's online dating.

Threshing floors would be a part of watchtowers where the grain would be guarded from thieves and reapers would sleep overnight in these. She slept at the end of his feet and we'll pick up the story in chapter 3, verse 8: "At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer." And he said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I."

It was common that a servant could take a portion of the covering and put it over them to stay warm. Ruth is responding to the mercy that Boaz has shown her by asking for him to redeem her. By putting the cover over her in this situation, she is not a paid servant. She is asking for him, in essence, to take her under his wing. It is clear from Boaz's comments here that Boaz is considerably older than Ruth. I would hazard a guess he's probably in his 40's or 50's. Ruth chose this course of action not just to benefit herself, but she had Naomi in mind. She was thinking of her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law's benefit over the long term and the lineage of Elimelech's household.

In chapter 4 verse 5 Boaz said to the nearest redeemer, "On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also buy it from Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance." He wanted to buy the land but he backed out of the deal when he found he has to also marry Ruth. It says that he backed out of it "lest I impair my own inheritance." He may have had other children and may not have wanted to dilute their inheritance with other children. To confirm his refusal and that he had passed on the right to redeem to Boaz he took off his sandal and gave it to him.

You may have wondered like I have at times what has handing over a shoe got to do with this? It's like the opposite of Cinderella - he gives a shoe to signify he doesn't want to marry her. In of my presentations covering the archaeological proof of the Exodus I mentioned about a shoe-shaped artifact that had been found at Gilgal near Jericho. Well this custom has the same origin. It comes from Joshua 1:3 which speaks about wherever the sole of your foot is placed shall be your land inheritance. Giving the shoe in this custom signified the transfer of that land inheritance.

In verses 13 to 17 of chapter 4 we read about how Ruth and Boaz married, she gave birth to a son and they lived happily ever after. Ruth is a type of the church. She was a foreigner who grew up a pagan but has become a part of Israel and came to worship the true God. Boaz was Ruth's physical redeemer and a type of Jesus Christ who has redeemed us.

In conclusion, the next time you think of the book of Ruth I hope that you will remember the three main lessons we have drawn out from it:

- The need to be a loyal and caring friend like Ruth was to Naomi,
- The importance of having a good work ethic like Ruth, particularly when it comes to working out our own salvation and finally
- Remember the lesson from Naomi's life that no matter how bad things look, no matter how serious the trial is, nothing is too big for God.

It is a truly wonderful story that God has preserved for us in the book of Ruth.

RUTH

Ancestry: From the land of Moab (Descended from Abraham's nephew Lot)

When She Lived: Around 1100 BC

Contemporaries: Eli in Shiloh (central highlands) and Samson (SW Israel)

Residence: Moved to Bethlehem in Judah with her mother-in-law Naomi after death of her first husband where she then met Boaz.

Marital Status: She married Boaz (second husband) after her first husband died.

Descendants: She was mother to Obed, grandmother to Jesse and great grandmother of King David and later Jesus was of her lineage.

LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF RUTH

- Be a loyal and caring friend like Ruth was to Naomi (Ruth 1:7-22, Proverbs 17:17).
- Have a good work ethic like Ruth, particularly when it comes to overcoming sin and working out our own salvation (Ruth 2:3-17, Proverbs 31:15, Philippians 2:12).
- Remember the lesson from Naomi's life that no matter how bad things look, no matter how serious the trial is, nothing is too big for God (Ruth 1:20-21, 2:19-20, 4:13-16).