

RUTH: THE ROMANCE OF REDEMPTION

by Ray C. Stedman

When Benjamin Franklin was United States Ambassador to France, he occasionally attended the Infidels Club -- a group that spent most of its time searching for and reading literary masterpieces. On one occasion Franklin read the book of Ruth to the club when it was gathered together, but changed the names in it so it would not be recognized as a book of the Bible. When he finished, they were unanimous in their praise. They said it was one of the most beautiful short stories that they had ever heard, and demanded that he tell them where he had run across such a remarkable literary masterpiece. It was his great delight to tell them that it was from the Bible, which they professed to regard with scorn and derision, and in which they felt there was nothing good.

The book of Ruth is certainly a literary masterpiece. It is a beautiful story of a romance. I wonder how it would be featured in some of our romance magazines today. I can almost see the headline; it would be something like HOW ONE WOMAN FOUND HAPPINESS -- in the arms of second husband. It is a book that inflames the imagination, because all through it is entwined the captivating theme of love and romance.

Although it is a beautiful story in itself, it is the story behind the story -- its meaning and significance -- that is simply fascinating. The book of Ruth is one of those beautiful Old Testament pictures that is designed by God himself to illustrate the dramatic truths of the Christian faith expounded in the New Testament. It is a word picture in the Old Testament illustrative of the truth we find in the New Testament, as I Corinthians tells us:

Now these things happened to them as a warning [literally, as a type] but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Cor. 10:11)

It is the story of the romance of redemption.

The four divisions of this book trace for us the four major steps of the work of redemption. The book begins with an introduction of the characters:

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years; and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was bereft of her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:1-5)

In those five short verses we are introduced to a series of personalities who are the keys to this book.

One of the clues to making the Old Testament a living book is to learn the meaning of the names of the characters who are featured in prominent places. God has hidden away great truths in these names. The story of Ruth begins with a man whose name was Elimelech. Elimelech means "my God is king." In that one name the whole doctrine of man -- "My God is king" -- may be comprehended. This book begins with God, just as the Bible begins with God -- "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen. 1:1) The Bible never argues the existence of God. The God of the Bible is the God who is, the God who exists. From beginning to end you will never find any apologetic dissertations on whether or not God exists. The Bible starts with the fact of God. The existence of God is a matter that rests wholly upon the innate revelation given to the human heart.

Man either admits that God exists or he denies that God exists -- one or the other. He is built to recognize the existence of God. There is no hope for him if he doesn't, because as Hebrews 11 tells us, "For whoever

would draw near to God must believe that he exists." (Heb. 11:6) God is. And it isn't difficult to believe that God is. Light from God is streaming to us from all around. It is more difficult to believe that God isn't. Only those who are educated beyond their intelligence finally talk themselves into believing that there is no God. The whole story of man begins with that great fact that God is.

But there is more: "My God is king." It is the "God who is" who is my God. That means that the "God who is" is available to me as a man. The God who exists and created the universe has made himself completely available to man. Hebrews 11:6 goes on to say "whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Jesus said, "Seek and you will find." (Matt. 7:7) If a man never finds God, it is because he never bothered to seek. Any man who wants to come to God -- discover the realities of God, grasp the fact of God, and experience the person of God -- needs simply to begin to seek God, because God makes himself available step by step to the man who begins to look. Then he becomes "my God" and this is the relationship that man in his innocence had with God. In the eighth Psalm we read David's remarkable statement:

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him and the son of man that thou dost care for him? (Ps. 8:3, 4)

Then the Psalmist answers his own question:

Thou...dost crown him glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands... (Ps. 8:5, 6)

Here is the third facet of that name "my God is king." Man was given dominion over all the universe that God had made, but only as he himself was subject to the dominion of the God who made him. As he subjected himself to the dominion of "my God" (all that you are is available to me), he began to exercise dominion over all the rest of the world. As he was subject to dominion, he was given dominion. This was exactly the relationship into which Jesus Christ came. After quoting the verse from Psalm 8. the writer of Hebrews said.

... we do not yet see all things in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels ... that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one." {Heb. 2:8b-9 RSV}

We see Jesus. When Jesus Christ came, he came not to act as God. but as a man. subject to the dominion of God. All dominion was given to him. As he said:

"All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me." {cf, Matt 28:18 KJV}

Why? "Because," he said, "I am totally subject to the dominion of my father." That is the true relationship of man with God. Thus when Adam walked in that relationship, all the universe was subject to his dominion because his "God was king." That is man in his innocence.

Now Elimelech married a woman whose name was Naomi. which means "pleasure." In the joining of these two names you have the entire doctrine of the fall of man. When Satan came to Eve in the Garden of Eden, he said to her, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" (Gen. 3:1) In the clever phrasing of that question he suggested that God was denying that which would bring pleasure to her. Then he dangled the fruit in front of her and said. "It looks good, doesn't it? I'll tell you something. It tastes better than it looks. And if you will take of it, you will find that it will make you wise."

The devil in his cleverness did not lay before Eve a temptation which she could obviously see through. He offered her a very delightful proposition. He suggested to her that if she would take of this fruit -- which God in his sovereignty had forbidden them to take as a test of their obedience -- she would be given the ability to become like God. She would be entering into a new domain where she could step out into her own independent activity and be "god" without God. Satan offered man pleasure.

When "my God is king" married "pleasure" he stepped outside of the limits God had placed upon him. He

sought his own pleasure before he sought his own God. We read in the New Testament that such are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. This is the spirit of the age and has been through the centuries. In the marriage of Elimelech to Naomi we have a picture of the fall of man.

Now this couple had two children whose names were Mahlon and Chilion. Mahlon means "sick" and Chilion means "pining away." Imagine naming your children that! How would you like to go visit this home and ask about the boys. Mahlon and Chilion? There is little Mahlon lying in the corner, sick, pasty-faced with a temperature, hovering between life and death. Little Chilion is nothing but skin and bones wasting away. When these boys grew older they went into the country of Moab. While they were there (we read) the boys married girls who were Moabites. Their names were Ruth and Orpah. Now Orpah means "fawn" -- a little young deer. We also use the word in English to mean a superficial kind of love -- fawning upon someone -- a kind of surface love or attention. Ruth means "beauty."

The next thing we read is that Elimelech died, Mahlon died, and Chilion died. All three died -- and this is exactly in line with the picture in scripture of the results of the fall. After Adam and Eve were excluded from the Garden of Eden we read that they had a son, Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain. Then we read of the generations of Adam. Adam had a son whose name was Seth. Seth died. Seth had a son whose name was Enos. Enos died. Enos had a son. He died -- and he died, and he died, and he died. All down through that chapter the bell of death rings out again and again. When "my God is king" marries "pleasure" the result is death. Here in the land of Moab these three men died and left behind three heartbroken, lonely widows.

Now the heart of the story really begins with these three widows in the land of Moab. We read that Naomi decided to return to her home in Bethlehem in Judah. Both of these girls made a promise to accompany her back into the land. As they started out along the road and got further from Moab, Orpah kept dropping behind. At last Naomi saw that Orpah's heart was really not in this journey -- that she longed to go back into Moab. So Naomi kissed Orpah good-bye and sent her back. Naomi said to Ruth, "Do you want to go back also?" Then Ruth said those wonderful words that we often hear a bride say to the groom during the marriage service, standing at the altar together:

"Entreat me not 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; ..." {Ruth 1:16b RSV}

In these two girls there is a beautiful picture of the two kinds of commitments that are made to Jesus Christ. Many, many times you will find that two people who at the very same moment and under the same circumstances, being confronted by the same truth, will make a commitment to Jesus Christ -- but one of them is a soulish commitment. Such people are emotionally stirred for the moment. They are drawn by some superficial view of our Lord's person or his glory, or something that they hope to gain from their commitment. They do not actually meet the Lord in the sanctuary of their spirit. At the moment you can't tell the difference between this and a true commitment -- they both look alike. But as the two walk on in the Christian life, one begins to hang back and at last, like Orpah, comes to the place where, as she says, "I can't go on any longer." We read that Orpah turned and went back to her own people and her own gods. It was only a superficial change that had occurred; they had always been her own people and her own gods.

But in Ruth you see that marvelous commitment that says, "Where you go I will go." I am wholly yours -- body, soul and spirit. "Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God. I will die where you die. I will never go back." We read in verse 19:

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, ..." {Ruth 1:19-20a RSV}

Naomi means "pleasure" but Mara means "bitterness." She goes on:

"... for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." {Ruth 1:20b RSV}

Elimelech married "pleasure," but the result was "bitterness." When "my God is king" marries 'pleasure,' "pleasure" is turned into "bitterness." Why had the women come to Bethlehem? We read that they "had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food." (Ruth 1:6) The Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and he said, "I am the bread of life." (John 6:35) So they had come to the place where God visited his people and gave them bread.

From the bitterness in chapter one, we come to the working of grace in chapter two, verse one:

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's, a man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. {Ruth 2:1}

The name Boaz means "strength" -- a man of strength and of wealth.

And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor [or grace]." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." {Ruth 2:2 RSV}

They arrived at Bethlehem. in the bitterness of their widowhood, with no help, or home, or hope. The only thing left to them was to take the place of destitution and bankruptcy. But somehow Ruth knows what to do when they go there. for she says to her mother-in-law, "Let me go to the field. and glean among the ears of grain that I might find grace." She is looking for grace. On the long, weary road back these two women must have been talking about what they would do when they got to Bethlehem. Ruth must have said, "Naomi, we are both widows and we don't have any husbands to watch out for us. How are we going to support ourselves when we get there? We have no money. We have no property that we can turn into money. What shall we do when we get there?" Naomi must have remembered the provision that the God of Israel had made for the destitute and the bankrupt in the law:

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:9, 10)

God had made provision for the poor. When Ruth and Naomi arrived in Israel, they took the place of destitution. They didn't say to themselves, "We have been away and people will expect that we made our fortune in Moab. Perhaps we ought to open an account down at the store and live on credit for awhile. If we can act like we are rich, everybody will take it for granted that we are really rich and maybe we can work out some kind of a scheme to get by." If they had done this, they would have faced catastrophe. But instead, Ruth took the place of destitution and went out looking for grace. And because she looked, she found it. If you seek for grace, you will find it.

So she set forth and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened [Just happened?] to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, ...{Ruth 2:3a RSV}

Have you ever discovered the glories of God's "happenings" in your own life? How many times have you thought something just happened by accident and then you discovered that it was by divine appointment that you were where you were. Remember little Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree? (Luke 19:2) It just "happened" to be the tree that the Lord Jesus chose to stand under. And little round, fat, bald Zacchaeus, clinging to the branch of the sycamore tree, looked down and congratulated himself because he didn't want anyone to see that behind the businesslike facade he had built up was a seeking heart. And it just "happened" that the Lord Jesus looked up, saw him there, called him by name and told him to come down. Did it just happen? Jesus knew his name. Zacchaeus was there by divine appointment.

When the woman of Samaria came to the well, she just "happened" to come at the noontime hour to find Jesus sitting there (John 4:7). It just happened -- by divine appointment. When Nicodemus came at night, he just happened to find the Lord Jesus still up (John 3:1). He was probably very surprised to find him, not realizing that the Lord knew that he was coming and was waiting for him by divine appointment.

Then we have this wonderful story of "boy meets girl," and it never gets old, does it? Ruth was gleaning in the field and Boaz saw her. He said to his workmen, "Who is this maiden?" They told him who she was, and Boaz went down to meet Ruth. Now it doesn't tell us how it happened, but if you use your sanctified imagination you can see that it must have been a bit awkward at first. She was working away (picking up the grain here and there) and along comes this handsome fellow -- evidently a wealthy man by his clothes. She drops her eyes, afraid to look up at him.

He stands on one foot and then the other, clears his throat a couple of times and finally says, "Shalom." She looks up and says, "Shalom." Then he says to her, "Listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my maidens." She is encouraged by this. He goes on, "Let your eyes be upon the field which they are reaping, and go after them. I have charged the young men not to bother you." She wonders what is happening. So finally she asks:

"Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" {Ruth 2:10b RSV}

Boaz says,

"All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before..." {Ruth 2: 11b RSV}

"I may be a stranger to you. but you are not a stranger to me." You wonder how this all happened. but I have found out about you. This is the old. old story of a lost and guilty sinner meeting Jesus Christ. He may be a stranger to us, but we are not strangers to him.

As you trace through this wonderful chapter you find that Boaz tells his men to drop a little grain here and there so as to increase the bounty that she is gleaning out of the field. To her amazement she discovers that these workmen are undoubtedly the sloppiest workmen in the whole kingdom of Israel, because they leave huge quantities of grain on the ground. When she goes home that night with her apron full, she beats out the grain and comes to Naomi with a whole ephah. An ephah is probably a little more than a bushel of barley. Naomi greets her and says, "Where have you been working today?" Ruth says, "I gleaned in a field of a man whose name is Boaz."

Naomi's response was:

"Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!...The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin." (2:20)

The Hebrew word for nearest kin means literally "one who has the right to redeem." If you look back at Deuteronomy 25, you will see what she is referring to:

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel." {Deut 25:5-6 RSV}

In other words the right of redemption is the right to bring life out of death; to restore life to that which was dead. Here is one who had the right to redeem.

Now in chapter three we read of the clearing up of the debts. In reading this through it appears that Ruth acts in a way that to us may seem presumptuous and very unmaidenly. But she is really acting quite strictly in accord with the law of Israel. When Boaz lies by his threshing floor at night, she comes, uncovers his feet and lies down at his feet. He discovers her there and asks who it is. She identifies herself and then he says to her:

"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." (3:10)

In this way she has laid claim to his right to redeem her, an action that is perfectly right within the law of Israel. So Boaz says:

"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 woman of worth. And now it is true that I am a near kinsman, ..." {Ruth 3:11-12a RV}

This is what she made clear by this act on her part. But Boaz knew something else:

"... yet there is a kinsman nearer man I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will do the part of the next of kin for you, well; let him but if he is not willing to do the part of the next of kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will do the part of the next of kin for you...." {Ruth 3:12b-13a RSV}

There is an obstacle that needs to be cleared away before he can act as a redeemer. Turn to the opening part of chapter four and you will see how he demonstrated his interest and how he removed the obstacle.

And Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there; and behold, the next of kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here"; and he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here;" so they sat down [as witnesses]. Then he said to the next of kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people.'" {Ruth 4:1-4a RSV}

The court is now assembled.

"If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." {Ruth 4:4b RSV}

Can't you just see Ruth and Naomi hiding behind a bush listening to what is happening and wondering what the man will say? (I don't know what he looked like, but I rather think he had a long red beard and was probably about 75 years old. And Ruth was holding her breath, because if this man redeemed the land, he also bought the right to her.) To her chagrin and dismay the man replies. "I will redeem it." Poor Ruth -- her heart doubtless sank within her. Then Boaz stepped in and played the card he had been holding in reserve:

"The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also buying Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the dead, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance." (4:5)

When the kinsman learned that, he said:

"I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance." {Ruth 4:6b RSV}

And Ruth's heart grew light again. Now what does this picture? Remember that we are told the law has been given to men as an apparent redeemer (Rom. 7:10). Moses had said "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...then you shall live" (Deut. 30:16). So the law has the nearest right of redeemer, because it is something inherently involved with mankind. But there is one trouble with the law. It can only redeem outwardly and never inwardly. It can only control our outward affairs and activities; it never touches the motives of the heart. When the law is charged with the task of changing the inner nature of man -- changing his motives so that he wants to do what is right -- the law must say "I cannot do it." In Romans 8:3-4 we read:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, ... {Rom 8:3-4a RSV}

So that the righteousness that the law demands might be ours in Jesus Christ.

When the obstacle was removed. Boaz moved to redeem Ruth:

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon." {Ruth 4:9 RSV}

All of it.

"Also Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his native place; you are witnesses this day." {Ruth 4:10 RSV}

The Lord Jesus left his glory in heaven and came to earth as our redeemer to die upon the cross. He bought all the fallen estate of Adam for every inhabitant of the earth, without exception. Every man woman, and child in this world has been redeemed already by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has bought back all the fallen estate of the sons of Adam -- whoever they might be -- Mahlon and Chilion and Elimelech. But where was Orpah in this picture? Ruth was ready to enter into all the value of Boaz's activity for her, and Orpah could have had it too. But because Orpah turned and went back to her own people and to her own gods, she is never heard from again -- she has no part in the inheritance. Though Boaz bought the entire inheritance of her husband as well as Ruth's, Orpah is lost in this picture because she turned and went back to her own people and to her own gods.

But of Ruth we read:

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next of kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age;" {Ruth 4:13-15a RSV}

The boy who is to be born of this union, of the "strength" of the redeemer and the "beauty" of humility, is to be a restorer of life. This is the ministry of Jesus Christ, our restorer of life: he takes the dead, and the things of death in our life, and replaces them with vitality and life. Then we read:

Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom [like any good grandmother] and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, the father of David. {Ruth 4:16-17 RSV}

And of the Lord Jesus! It is written that Christ was David's son. Ruth is one of the forebears of the Lord Jesus Christ. and her name becomes great in Bethlehem. as the people predicted that it would.

This child's name, Obed, means "worship" -- making our story complete.

When Elimelech, "my God is king" married Naomi, "pleasure" he fell into the bitterness of death. Out of that comes Ruth, in the beauty of humility, taking her place as a destitute stranger, dependent upon the grace of Boaz, "the strong one, the one of wealth and strength." He redeems her and binds her to himself in marriage. When "beauty" is married to "strength," the house is filled with "worship." Isn't that a wonderful picture?

Now turn to the second book of Ruth. Oh, I forgot -- it's not in the Bible, is it? But it is written in many a life. Ruth was a woman redeemed by grace. But imagine this scene: One morning Ruth says to her husband Boaz, "Dear, I am going into the field this morning." She picks up her bundle and starts out for the fields. Boaz says to her, "Ruth, where are you going?" And she replies, "I am just going out to get a little breakfast from the fields. I'm going to pick up a little grain here and there that we might have something to eat for a snack."

How do you think he would feel? Here his wife whom he had redeemed out of bondage and slavery as a foreigner and taken into his house was saying to him, "Now I am going out to glean in the fields as I did before you redeemed me." This is exactly what we do to Christ, so many times. We are married to him who has given us everything. Christ is the one risen from the dead, the restorer of life, the one of wealth and strength, who has given us all our estate. Don't you think Boaz would say to her, "Ruth, what is the matter with you? Don't you realize that you are my wife? I have given you everything I have. You don't need to glean in the field. You own the whole estate right along with me. All that I have is yours. Why do you go out to glean?"

Don't you suppose that the Lord Jesus looks at us sometimes in amazement and says, "What are you doing? Why do you keep coming to me and asking for the thing that you already have? Why do you ask for health and strength and grace and joy and peace? I have given you all this. All that I am is all that you need. Why keep begging for that which you already have?"

If we would begin to walk out upon this mighty transforming truth that God has given us here in the book of Ruth -- that we are now married to him who is risen from the dead, married to the man of strength and of wealth, who has given to us all that he is and all that he has -- we would see the incredible folly of our gleaning for insignificant scraps. If we saw what we were doing by that, our lives would be transformed. And the ones we live with at home would be the first ones to see it -- then the ones at work -- then the ones we encounter in the course of our daily affairs. Soon everyone would know that something had happened to us, and that we had begun to live in the glory and fullness of our redeemed life. That is what I want for me. Won't you join me in the "beauty" portrayed in Ruth?

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