

# RUTH

The book of Ruth was written at the same time as the book of Judges or shortly after. We do not know when exactly the story takes place and so we cannot ascertain who may have been the Judge at the time, if indeed there was one.

We do not know who wrote the book but traditionally it was ascribed to Samuel. With the book ending with a genealogy mentioning David it could not have been written before his time. Some believe that Samuel wrote the book to support David's pedigree as king. If Solomon had already ascended to the throne doubtless the genealogy would have been extended down to him.

The people featured in the book show us that even in the darkest of times there were those who remained true to God and to His ways. In character the book is far removed from what we find in Judges. In contrast to the bloodshed, sin and depravation that we find in Judges, Ruth is a wonderful personal story with a happy ending. It is a short book, only four chapters, with a few principal people and one main location (Bethlehem). The main setting in Judah is just a few miles from the Benjamite territory that featured in the closing chapters of Judges.

There are a number of key themes to look out for when reading Ruth:

- Faithfulness
- Kindness
- Integrity
- Protection
- Blessing

The four short chapters can be outlined as follows:

Chapter 1 Ruth remains loyal to Naomi

Chapter 2 Ruth gleanes in Boaz's field

Chapter 3 Ruth obeys Naomi's plan

Chapter 4 Ruth and Boaz are married

In the canon of Scripture there are only two books named after and featuring women, Ruth and Esther. It is noteworthy that in these books a Gentile marries an Israelite (Ruth) and an Israelite marries a Gentile (Esther). Both played a part of God's redemptive plan. Ruth is an important link in the genealogy of the Messiah (she is the great-grandmother of David, Luke 3:32,33). Esther was instrumental in saving God's people from destruction in Persia.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **1 – 5**

The book opens with information that at some time during the time of the Judges there is a famine in the land. This resulted in a man from Bethlehem called Elimelech (2my God is king") taking his wife and two sons away from Bethlehem (ironically, the house of bread) and into the land of Moab. Moab was to the east of the Dead Sea. We are told that his wife was called Naomi ("my pleasant one") and the two sons are Mahlon ("sickly") and Kilion ("pining"). During some periods in the era of Judges the Moabites oppressed the Israelites. It appears that this was not the situation at this time. We are told that they were Ephrathites. Ephratha was an ancient name for Bethlehem meaning fruitfulness (see Genesis 35:19, Micah 5:2). At some stage Elimelech died in Moab leaving Naomi as a widow. She has the two sons who would be expected to care for her following her husband's death.

The two sons married Moabite women, Kilion married Orpah and Mahlon married Ruth. Whilst Israelites were discouraged from befriending Moabites (Deuteronomy 23:3 – 6) and Moabites were forbidden to worship at the Tabernacle because of their hostility to the Israelites during the exodus from Egypt. It should be noted that as the Moabites were not within the borders of the Promised Land, they are not

included in the list of nations that are recorded in Deuteronomy 7:1- 4 as those with whom the Israelites were not permitted to marry. They were also descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. However, from Ezra 9:1, 2 and Nehemiah 13:23 – 25 we see that Moabites were included in the prohibited list.

It appears that neither of the sons had any children and after ten years they both die. They left a grieving mother and two wives. The situation for Naomi looked bleak. She had no one to provide for her as would have been expected in her culture. She was in a foreign land with only her two daughters in law for help.

### **6 – 13**

News reaches Naomi that the famine in Judah is at an end. The reason given for this is that the Lord had come to the aid of his people. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah prepare to return to Bethlehem. This would have been a potentially dangerous journey for three women to undertake. Naomi urges the girls to return to their mother's homes. She shows her appreciation of their kindness to her and to their husbands, her sons. She hopes that the Lord will repay their kindness by providing new husbands from amongst their own people. Initially both of the girls weep as she kissed them farewell and say that they will travel with her.

Naomi is insistent that they should leave her. She says that they could not expect her to have more sons that they could later marry. She is referring to the *levirate marriage* law whereby a man was expected to marry the widow of a dead brother (see Deuteronomy 25:5 – 10). This law helped to ensure that a widow might be cared for and the family name of the dead man could continue. Clearly at her age having sons would be unlikely and if she did have sons then by the time that they were old enough to marry Orpah and Ruth would also be old. Naomi declares that as she sees the situation the Lord's hand has turned against her, there is a bitterness within her (13).

### **14 - 18**

At this point there are more loud tears and Orpah decides to stay in Moab. Ruth, however, continues to cling to Naomi. Naomi tells her to follow Orpah's example and return to her people and her gods. Ruth is adamant that she will stay with Naomi and she will embrace Naomi's God. She will leave behind her people and her gods and remain true to Naomi. In verse 17 Ruth declares an oath before the Lord that she should deal with her severely if she deserted Naomi. Ruth is so determined that Naomi relents and ceases from urging her to return. Ruth chose Naomi's destination, dwelling, people, God and even, in the future, her burial place.

### **19 – 22**

The two women return to Bethlehem. They cause quite a stir as people recognise Naomi. She says she should now be called Mara (bitter) because of what the Lord has brought to her life. She says that she went away full from Bethlehem and has returned empty. In fact, when she left Bethlehem, she was far from full, she left because of the famine. Nothing is said here about the people's reaction to Ruth, a Moabitess, accompanying her. The chapter ends by informing us that they arrived in Bethlehem as the barley harvest is starting. The time of the barley harvest was the season of firstfruits. The story is being set up for what will come next.

### **Questions to discuss**

1. Was God really to blame for Naomi's bitterness?
2. Why would Ruth ask God to punish her if she broke her promise to Naomi?
3. What do you think are the most important lessons for today about love and loyalty that we can learn from this chapter?

# RUTH

## CHAPTER 2

Having returned to Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest Naomi and Ruth are faced with the problem of how they can feed themselves. Two women alone were vulnerable but now we find that Naomi does have relatives in the town albeit from her dead husband's family. In this chapter we are introduced to one of those relatives, an important man called Boaz who would have a pivotal place in the women's story and indeed in the timeline of the Messiah.

### **1 – 3**

Firstly, we are told of the family link between Naomi and Boaz. This man is described as a "man of standing" in the town. At harvest time, according to the Law, Israelites were not allowed to completely strip their fields clean when they harvested. Instead they had to leave some of the grain unharvested so that the poor, fatherless, widows and strangers could glean what was left. This is decreed in Leviticus 19:9, 23:22 and Deuteronomy 24:19. It seems that Naomi must have mentioned this possibility for provision to Ruth as it she who suggests that she goes into the fields to glean leftover grain. Naomi is happy for her to do so. She simply chooses as a field not knowing who it belonged to. As it turned out the field belonged to Boaz. We can see in this a divine arrangement for provision for the women.

### **4 – 12**

Boaz arrives in the field and he greets the harvesters with a blessing invoking the name of the Lord. He soon notices a female stranger at the edge of his field and asks his overseer if he knows who she is. The overseer tells him that she is the Moabite woman who had arrived with Naomi. He does not name her, perhaps there is a hint that he disapproves of her. He does, however, indicate that she has worked hard in the field throughout the day and had only taken a short rest.

Boaz approaches Ruth and calls her "my daughter", a welcoming greeting that would perhaps put her at her ease. He encourages her to remain working in his field and not to glean elsewhere. He tells her to follow the other women and pick up the grain left behind by the men. He also says that he has already told his men to treat her with respect and that she should share in the water collected by the men.

The friendly approach that Boaz made to Ruth amazed her. He bowed down before him and asked why she should be so highly favoured by him. He replies that he has heard about her and how she had loyally stayed with Naomi after the death of their husbands. He is impressed that she has left her family, country and gods to come to Bethlehem. He prays that the Lord, under whose protective wings she has placed herself, would richly reward her.

### **13 – 17**

At mealtime Boaz invites her to join him to eat with him and his workers. He shares his food with her. She has more than enough and is allowed to keep what was left over. As she is about to return to work, he instructs his men to allow her to glean among the sheaves before they have finished with them. He even tells them to pull up and leave extra stalks for her to gather up. This is going beyond what the Law prescribed.

At the end of the day Ruth was able to thresh the barley she had been able to glean. We are told that the grain weighed an *ephah* which is around 30 pounds in weight. Clearly, she had worked hard during the long day in the field. She returns to Naomi with the threshed barley and also the leftover food from her meal.

### **18 – 23**

Naomi is astonished at how much food Ruth has been able to glean and questions her to find out whose field she had worked in. She realises that Ruth must have been favoured by whoever owned the field in order for her to gather so much. She pronounces a blessing on whoever that man may be. When Ruth tells her whose field it was Naomi recognises his name and that he was a relative of her dead husband. Boaz is a

“guardian redeemer” or “kinsman redeemer”. Under the law he would have some responsibility to help or redeem a relative who was in difficulty, see Leviticus 25:25 – 55.

Ruth tells Naomi that Boaz had encouraged her to stay in his fields for all of the harvest. Naomi encourages her to do so. After the kindness he has already shown it would have been disrespectful and potentially dangerous for her to glean elsewhere, not everyone would have been so understanding and kind towards a Moabite woman. Naomi is sensing the Lord’s provision for them. We are told that Ruth stayed in Boaz’s fields for both the barley and wheat harvests whilst still living with Naomi.

## CHAPTER 3

### 1 – 5

By now Naomi has a plan to provide a husband for Ruth, to provide security for her. She has her eye on Boaz. Naomi could have tried to use the Law to provide for herself but she wants Ruth to be rewarded for her loyalty and faithfulness to her. She describes in detail what Ruth must do to make the customary appeal to Naomi’s kinsman for protection. The details may seem strange to us but not to an observant Israelite. Ruth would have been unaware of the procedure which is why Naomi explains what needs to be done in detail.

### 6 – 7

Ruth obeys Naomi’s instructions and lies at the feet of Boaz when he has gone to bed.

### 8 – 11

In the middle of the night Boaz stirs and is surprised to find there is a young woman lying at his feet. It is dark and so he does not immediately recognise her. She tells him who she is and makes the request that he should spread his garment over her. This would symbolise his acceptance of the position as her kinsman redeemer.

Boaz responds by blessing her. He commends her for not pursuing younger men. He agrees to her request for him to become her kinsman redeemer. He also says that he knows that her reputation in the town is that she is a virtuous woman.

### 12 – 13

All seems to be going well but Boaz says that there is a legal complication. Whilst it is true that he could be a kinsman redeemer to her there was another man who stood in a closer relationship than he did. Boaz could not fulfil the position unless and until the other man refused to act for her. Boaz encourages her to stay with him, lying at his feet, until morning when he would seek out this man and if he will not act then Boaz certainly will be her kinsman redeemer.

### 14 – 18

Just before dawn Ruth prepares to leave. Boaz is anxious that no one would know what had happened in the night. There is no suggestion that Boaz and Ruth had done anything other than sleep, but anyone seeing her leave in the morning would doubtless cast aspersions on them both. Before leaving Boaz fills Ruth’s shawl with six measures of barley to take to Naomi. When Naomi heard all that had happened she advised Ruth to remain still and wait to see what Boaz would do next. She believes that Boaz will act quickly, he will not rest until the matter is settled.

### Questions to discuss

1. From what he says in 2:12 what would you say was Boaz’s spiritual condition?
2. In 2:11 Boaz speaks of Ruth’s reputation. What reputation do we have?
3. What impresses you most about Boaz in chapter 3?

## RUTH

### CHAPTER FOUR

Following Boaz's promise to Ruth in Chapter 3 that he would speak to the nearer kinsman redeemer concerning her we find that he fulfils his promise. The chapter is instructive concerning the customs of the times in which it was written.

#### **1 – 5**

Boaz goes to the town gate and sits down. The city or town gate was traditionally where the elders would discuss matters that are brought to them for judging or counsel. Soon the kinsman redeemer, who is not named, also comes to the gate and Boaz approaches him and asks him to sit down with him. He also gathers ten of the elders to witness their discussion. Some commentators believe that the ten witnesses are representative of the Ten Commandments, in other words they represent the Law.

Boaz outlines the position concerning Naomi and her dead husband's land. She had sold it or more likely it was mortgaged when Elimelech left Bethlehem. A kinsman redeemer had the right to buy it back to keep the land in the extended family and so that Elimelech's name would not die. Boaz says that if he is unwilling to do so then he was next in line to fulfil the role of kinsman redeemer and he was willing. Initially the man agrees to purchase the land.

Boaz then reminds him that if he buys the land, he also would have to buy it from Ruth so that her dead husband's name would remain. By doing so he would also have to commit to marrying Ruth.

#### **6 – 12**

Now the man declares that he cannot redeem the land as it might ruin his own inheritance. If Ruth were to have a son then this would disturb any plans he may have in place for his own inheritance. Ultimately the land would go to Ruth's heirs, not his. It is also possible that he may have been unable financially to take on the cost of a new field and new wife. There is also the possibility that he did not want to take a Moabitess as a wife but this is not explicitly stated.

The man then encourages Boaz to be the kinsman redeemer. As a sign of their agreement the man hands over his sandal to Boaz. This was a culturally accepted sign of someone surrendering a right to someone else. By surrendering his sandal, he has surrendered his right to both the field and to Ruth. According to the Law the widow, in this case Naomi, should take the man's sandal off and spit in his face for his refusal to build up his brother's line (Deuteronomy 25:9). The elders witnessed the transaction. Boaz then declared before them his intention to both buy the field and also to take Ruth as his wife.

At no time do we discover the man's name. This may be a deliberate snub or how of contempt for a man who refused to fulfil his obligations under the Law.

After Boaz makes his declaration the elders and the people who were gathered round declared blessings on both Ruth and himself. They spoke of the wives of Jacob (Rachel and Leah) with the desire that Ruth would become a mother to great sons. They spoke words of blessing and prosperity over Boaz. They also invoked the names of Perez and Tamar. Perez was an ancestor of Boaz the illegitimate son of Tamar and Judah (See Genesis 38:6 – 29). We see mentioned here a woman who was severely

disadvantaged and yet the Lord blessed her. Tamar is included in the genealogy given in Matthew 1:3. The sordid details of her story are overlooked and the story concentrates on the fact that here was another example of a levirate marriage between an Israelite and a foreigner.

### **13 – 17**

Boaz and Ruth are subsequently married and soon they are blessed with a son. The phrase “the Lord gave her conception” may indicate that she had been barren during the period of her first marriage to Mahlon but now God has graciously enabled her to conceive.

The local women are delighted for Naomi who now has a grandson. They also show how much they perceive that Ruth has been a great help and support for Naomi, better than seven sons! The scene depicted in verses 14 to 17 probably took place on the day of the baby’s presentation (see Leviticus chapter 12).

Naomi becomes a nurse for the baby (16). By clasping him to her breast she recognised the child as being part of her own family. The neighbouring women name the child Obed which means “servant”. We are told that he subsequently became the father of Jesse, David’s father. These details reinforce the theory that the book of Ruth was written to provide a historical basis for the family background of David from whose line the Messiah-Redeemer would come.

### **18 – 22**

The book ends with a genealogical list rather than continuing with the story of the loves of Ruth, Naomi, Boaz and Obed. The listing goes back to Perez who had been mentioned in verse 12. Historically the line covers a period of over 600 years and so it is almost certain that the account is an edited one. This is not unusual in the Bible.

### **Questions to discuss**

1. What are the most important changes you see in Naomi’s life since the beginning of the book?
2. From reading Ruth, what is the evidence that can be seen of God’s sovereignty over circumstances?
3. What do you think was the turning point in the story?
4. In what ways can you see the ministry of Jesus foreshadowed in the life and actions of Boaz towards Ruth?