

Lecture 29 – Love Spans Any Barrier
Ruth 1:1-4:22
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After the book of Judges with its stench of decaying morality and spiritual condition, the book of Ruth is like an oasis in the desert . . . a breath of fresh air, isn't it? Traditionally most of us have heard this story taught or interpreted as I'm going to present it to you today. Our English Bible translations present Ruth as an alien Moabite woman married into a Hebrew family, exchanging her idolatry religion for worship of the true God, and becoming the ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, R. K. Phillips has an alternative interpretation with some very interesting food for thought. I'll just give you a suggestion to use the Google search and put in the words Ruth, Rahab and Phillips if you're interested. Primarily, he argues that Ruth was not a Moabite by race, but actually an Israelite who lived in land taken from the Moabites by the tribes of Gad and Reuben when Israel settled east of the Jordan River. She was a country girl called a Moabite as more of a location identification rather than a racial identification. You should read his arguments for yourself.

Rethinking her ancestry can give us a fresh look at the Book of Ruth I think is worth our time; however, as I said, this

presentation will follow a traditional interpretation of Ruth as a racially Moabite woman.

One thing we know for sure, the story of Ruth transpired in troublesome, stormy, difficult times that were in the midst of religious apostasy, political disorganization and social chaos. But the beautiful message here is that even in the darkest days, God always has a remnant . . . He is never without witnesses . . . the light is never totally extinguished.

Although we don't know who wrote the book of Ruth, the setting is "in the time when judges ruled." Since it mentions the birth of David, it helps us follow the genealogy that leads toward the Messiah, Jesus Christ. It's possible Samuel wrote it perhaps as an endorsement of David as God's chosen king for Israel after Saul. Some think Nathan the prophet may have written this after David came to the throne to establish his rights of rulership over the new kingdom of Israel.

It covers a period of about ten years and is one of the two books in the Bible named after a woman, the other being Esther. Ruth has married a Hebrew husband and Esther is the story of a Jewess who married a Gentile husband.

There are two main themes in this small book: relationships and redemption. It is certainly a love story, but not so much the love between a man and woman as it is the devoted love between

daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. We're so used to hearing "mother-in-law" jokes (like the man who said, "My mother-in-law is an angel." His friend replied, "You're lucky. Mine is still alive.") – So, this is a refreshing challenge to our concept of relationships.

Making decisions is a complicated process. It's complicated even further by the world and times in which we live. Don't you sometimes wish it were as easy as choosing between black and white? Think of Elimelech and Naomi pondering the decision to leave Bethlehem, which means "house of bread," because of the famine. Sometimes God tries to speak to us through hardships. Should they have gone to the land of the Moabites? Some would say, "No," because the people in Bethlehem survived somehow. They were still there when Naomi returned and Boaz was obviously thriving. Some would say, "Yes," because if they hadn't. Ruth would not have become a part of Naomi's family.

But regardless of the "should," the fact is they "did." Think back and remember, Moab and Ammon were the results of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:19-38). Their descendants had always opposed Israel. Do you recall from our study how they refused Israel water and passage during the Exodus from Egypt and how they hired Balaam to curse the Israelites? Because of these deeds God forbade the Ammonites and Moabites entry into the congregation of the Lord

(Deut. 23:3). In fact, further down in Deut. 23:6, it says, “Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.” That is one of the reasons Phillips believes Ruth’s race was not Moabite.

Although Moab was not on the list of nations to be entirely destroyed by the Israelites under Joshua, its idolatrous practices were particularly offensive and troublesome. The Moabites worshipped the cruel god Chemosh with immoral fertility rites and human sacrifice.

Judges 3 related that Eglon, king of Moab, received power from the Lord to punish Israel for 18 years. When the people cried out, God raised up Ehud (remember he was the left-handed judge), who killed the fat king Eglon (and we had some graphic detail of that) and defeated Moab thus establishing peace for 80 years. It was perhaps during this peaceful time that the book of Ruth transpires. Again, the question, why go to Moab?

Elimelech may have rationalized that Moab was only 40-60 miles from Bethlehem depending on the route taken and, by settling not too far away, they could enjoy the benefit of improved survival conditions and be ready to return in the near future. Since Elimelech means “my God is King,” perhaps he felt spiritually strong enough to live among the heathen and yet maintain his family’s devotion to God without defilement.

That's a challenge for us today, isn't it? Our mobile society shifts and moves to follow jobs, or find affordable housing, or to have better schools for the children, or any number of other reasons that seek to improve our conditions of survival. Are we spiritually strong enough to make a physical move without losing anything from our roots of faith? Certainly what you're doing here – grounding yourselves in God's Word – is essential preparation for whatever life and its temptations bring in the future.

Elimelech and Naomi left Bethlehem during a time of distress to avoid participating in it, but in Moab they experienced far worse difficulties. First, Elimelech died. At this point Naomi might have decided to go back with her two sons, but she stayed in Moab. Again, we wonder what entered into that decision making process.

The sons married Moabite women. Mahlon married Ruth and Kilion married (Awr-pah) Orpah. We don't know the strength of this family's commitment to God. Maybe they were lukewarm, maybe the parents were strong and the children rebellious (can any of you relate to that?). But the point is that we see Naomi accepting these young women and, more than that, truly loving them.

Here we begin to examine the first theme in Ruth:
Relationships.

According to the custom, Naomi would have been in charge of the household, yet she must have ruled with a gentle hand. We think of the Proverbs 31 woman – vs. 26-27 “She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.” Think of all the things these Moabite women had to learn. Habits, customs, and patterns of living in a Hebrew household were probably much different than what they were accustomed to. But you know, as the older woman, the first responsibility for good relations lay with Naomi. What is true for domestic harmony in this situation is also true for us as Christians.

Romans 12:16 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” We need to be initiators of peaceful relationships. God is a gracious and accepting God and we are to extend His grace and acceptance to others. We know that the law of reaping and sowing had to be in effect . . . Naomi sowed her love into these daughters-in-law and Ruth reaped it back until it was (as we read) “better than having seven sons.”

Sometimes the common experiences we share in life help us as we minister to one another and it creates very special bonds. Certainly, these three women shared the desolation of widowhood and all the changes that it brings into life. Regardless of why Naomi had stayed in Moab when Elimelech died, now her decision was to go back to Bethlehem. The famine was over and all she had in Moab was three graves. In her opinion her name should have been Mara (bitter) instead of Naomi (meaning pleasant). Grief has a way of doing that to us, doesn't it? God has forsaken us . . . we're consumed by our circumstances.

We need to recognize, however, that Naomi was not accusing God of being mean to her, she was acknowledging that He was in control of her life and that she had suffered. This challenges us to honestly and realistically acknowledge the status of our walk with God, no matter how He may be dealing with us at the moment. By acknowledging God's sovereignty in our lives, we have a powerful testimony. For when we are vulnerable and transparent, God's tender dealing with us is readily observed by others. Naomi's was a transparent statement, not one of despair. She had no expectations that the girls would follow her back to her country. But even in her own grief, she was sensitive that Ruth and Orpah still had lives to lead and should stay and perhaps marry again.

There is a word “hesed,” sometimes translated loving kindness, for the kind of love that looks out for the best interests of the other person. Here we see that on display in Naomi.

How many partings have you gone through in your lifetime? How many more do you foresee having to face? It’s never easy and we can understand the pain. Probably out of a sense of duty, Orpah started the journey to Judah with Naomi, but at her mother-in-law’s urging and the “hesed” love expressed, Orpah chose to kiss Naomi good-bye and stay with her people. She disappears off the pages of Scripture.

But we can imagine what joy must have filled Naomi’s heart to hear Ruth say,

“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, there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” Ruth clung to her.

Commitment . . . I pray that’s still a strong word in your vocabulary. Sadly, it’s often the exception rather than the rule in much of our worldly society today. You, however, have made a commitment to this Bible study this year and I really commend you for that. I pray your commitment to Jesus Christ, your marriage, your family, a godly lifestyle could be just as strongly

stated and with as much conviction as Ruth's declaration to Naomi. We need people of commitment. We need to teach commitment to others by both word and example. Committed Christians are attractive Christians, just as we are attracted to Ruth because of her commitment.

It was harvest time between the celebrations of Passover and Pentecost and the whole town of Bethlehem was buzzing at the news of Naomi's return. As the women settled down, both of them probably expected to remain single. But when Naomi heard how kind her relative Boaz was to Ruth, – inquiring about her, protecting her, making her task easier, as well as providing her lunch, Naomi praised God!

In Leviticus we encountered the law about gleaning as an aid to the very poor. This was basically picking up the leftovers from the harvest, and I'm impressed that Ruth didn't think this was beneath her. Everything we see in Ruth is one of humility, gentleness, duty, hard work and certainly her actions were observed and talked about. Boaz noticed and wanted Ruth to stay in his fields and work no others. Boaz treated Ruth as God wanted His people to treat all strangers – with hospitality. Israelites were to remember they were once strangers in the land of Egypt. (Ex. 22:21) But the actions of Boaz went far beyond compassion to the poor. His instructions showed he had a

particular interest in Ruth. And, no doubt, Naomi began to make some inquiries of her own about Boaz. She knew about the law of a kinsman-redeemer.

That brings us to our second theme of this book:
Redemption.

On the surface this may look like Naomi and Ruth were trying to trap Boaz into marriage with the plan to have Ruth go and lie at his feet. But sensitivity to God's leading put the plan into Naomi's mind. By sending Ruth to Boaz, Naomi was letting him know that she had set aside any claim she may have had and instead was giving it to Ruth. The law of the levirate marriage required the initiative of the widow in seeking marriage (Deut. 25:5, 7-10), so the coming at night and lying at his uncovered feet awaiting him to cover them and her, was an intimate but modest overture offering love and, in essence, proposing a marriage.

Boaz understood perfectly and was honored because Ruth was known to be a "woman of noble character." Also, he was flattered that the age difference didn't matter in their relationship. I think he was elated! Of course, Naomi with women's intuition knew – first of all there was this evident attraction between them and, second, Naomi wanted what was best for Ruth knowing widowhood was hard. She needed a husband. Third, the recognition that Boaz was in a position as a relative to be a

kinsman-redeemer. The Lord blessed the plan and Boaz was accepting.

There was one problem, however. There was a closer relative and that man had the first option to marry Ruth and redeem Naomi's inheritance. Boaz assured Ruth that if this other relative was not prepared to act as kinsman-redeemer, then he certainly would be. Ruth would now have to wait until the matter was settled legally.

Briefly: "The kinsman-redeemer was one who came to a person's aid by ransoming him or his property (Lev. 25:25, 48-49). Since a woman married to a man would normally have the privilege of bearing his son and heir, in the case of the untimely death of the husband without a son, the law of the levirate marriage came into force. The husband's brother would marry the widow and any child would be raised up by his next of kin. In the matter of inheritance, a man's property was normally passed to his son. Failing these, it went to his daughters, and then in order to his brethren, or his father's brethren, and finally to his kinsman who was nearest to him."

Since Boaz had no intention of ignoring this established custom and law, he had to first give the other closer kin opportunity to fulfill his obligation as redeemer. We noticed Boaz' love and concern for Ruth's reputation as he sent her home

before it was light enough for her to be recognized and with an apron shawl full of grain.

Why would this other relative refuse? One commentator said, "Buying Naomi's land would cost him some money and enlarge his property holdings. Eventually after the deaths of Naomi and Ruth, the field would revert to Elimelech's clan (probably himself and Boaz). That was the "good news." However, if he married Ruth and fathered a son, Mahlon's inheritance would pass to the son and he would lose both money and land. This he did not want to accept." The elders neither rebuked him nor held him liable. Redemption is a voluntary act. It's a wonderful thing when one person will go to these special lengths to help another. The passing of the sandal simply implied, "you're free to buy it yourself."

Our fascination with the characters of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz notwithstanding, "God is the primary actor in the drama" writes Edward Campbell in his comments on *Ruth*, in *The Anchor Bible*. (Vol. 7, p. 29). Even though human beings are free moral agents, God's unseen hand directs events to accomplish His purpose, transforming Naomi's sorrow into wonderful joy and rewarding Ruth's commitment to Israel's God and community with an enduring place of honor in its heritage.

Well, we know the story has a happy ending. They got married and had baby Obed. Naomi was a doting grandmother and from Obed came Jesse the father of David and eventually the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can't leave this little book without making some applications to the rich types that exist in the book of Ruth.

Ruth, of course, is a type of us Gentiles. The Moabite shut out by Law is admitted by grace. Once far off, poor and needy, she is related to Boaz by marriage and so are we related to Christ by the marriage of our human nature to His divine nature. Certainly, we see a type of the church as the bride of Christ.

Boaz the kinsman-redeemer is a type of Christ. He is lord of the harvest; takes notice of us and treats us kindly; when we come to His feet and ask Him to spread His mantle of love over us how quickly He responds; He speaks comforting words and loads us with blessings; He redeems us, uniting Himself to us; loneliness ceases and we become fruitful and a blessing to others.

In spiritual perception, the book of Ruth stands at the doorway to the Gospel. It demonstrates God's openness to people other than Israel, and shows the kindness of God's

gracious plans for those whom He chooses and who choose to follow Him.

The family line in Matthew's genealogy lists four women in the line of Christ. Tamar gave birth through an illicit relationship with her father-in-law; Rahab made a living as a harlot; Bathsheba conceived through an adulterous relationship. Ruth alone was unstained in character, but she came from Gentile blood. This story of Ruth is an encouragement to us all. It reminds us we have the perfect redeemer who is not only willing, but able to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Before we close, I want to remind you once more where we've been and how much you're going to profit from this study every time you read your Bible.

God's people were captive, slaves to a cruel taskmaster. God's power delivered and God's provision met their physical needs and the need for leadership. What a leader Moses was! Hopefully you'll remember that salvation has always been by the grace of God and that the law was given to show a sinful but delivered people how to be holy and how to worship a holy God.

Disobedience brings consequences and God's patience is beyond belief. Next time you read John 3:16 "for God so loved the world . . ." maybe you'll appreciate how long-suffering that love has been. The Promised Land was theirs, but they never

fully took hold of it, did they? Have we taken hold of all that God has promised us, or has 90% been good enough? And how quickly they were distracted from serving God wholeheartedly. Grumble, grumble, grumble – infectious, unproductive, and inviting chastisement – did we learn anything from that? There was much to learn from both the good examples and bad examples in the lives of people we studied – intercessory prayer from Moses, courage from Joshua and Caleb, consequences of rash vows from Jephthah. And was there any conviction for us in the statement “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.”?

Next time you read Hebrews it will take on a whole new meaning I promise you. Read Hebrews 11 next week – those won't just be names, you'll know the stories of Moses, Jericho, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah. When you read Jude and it speaks of the error of Balaam, you'll know who he is. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 “our forefathers were all under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all ate the same spiritual food” you'll know that was the Shekinah glory cloud, the Red Sea, the manna, and that the rock Moses struck was Christ. And when Scripture says God is faithful, you'll be able to say Amen and AMEN!

May I close with a prayer of blessing: Almighty God, You are good, patient, kind, faithful, continually giving us what we don't deserve – grace and mercy. Bless each family represented here this summer and bring us together again in September. We praise you in the mighty name of Jesus!