

BIB104 OT2 Life & Literature of Israel

Unit 6b Ruth: Rest Through Redeeming Love

Presented by the



LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE
CAPITAL SEMINARY & GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Ruth. Despair, hopelessness, romance, hope, victories, defeats. It's an amazing story that goes from the gamut of the horrific to the amazing. And we get a chance today to unpack it and really be able to see what the Book of Ruth is really all about. Many people view it simply as a love story. But in doing that, they forget a lot of the important genealogy that's laid out, the historical ramifications that are there, and how a slice of humanity shows us so much even about Jesus Christ as we think of him as our kinsman redeemer.

So if you think about who wrote the Book of Ruth, you need to consider before that, that we just came off of Judges. Judges is a book that laid out for us the different individuals that God placed in a position of spiritual guidance as well as the political guidance of his nation. Ruth is nestled in there and is intertwined in this period of judges. Now, according to the Talmud, which is the Jewish tradition, the prophet Samuel wrote the Book of Ruth. However, it's unlikely that he was alive when the book was written. So the text itself says nothing of the author. But whoever wrote it was a skilled storyteller, and it's been called probably the most beautiful story that's ever written in the Old Testament in particular.

The final words of the Book of Ruth are with her great grandson David, which is in Ruth 4:17-22. We know it was written after his anointing. The genealogy at the end of the book shows David's lineage through the days of the judges. Acting as a support for the rightful kingship, Solomon is not mentioned, leading some to believe that the book was written before David even ascended to the throne. The key personalities that we're going to see in the book are Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. So the events of Ruth occurred sometime between 1160 B.C. and 1100 B.C., so not a big chunk of time in the overall history of the Old Testament. It was during the later period of the judges. Ruth 1:1 gives us an indication of that. And these were some dark days full of suffering that was brought on by the Israelites' apostasy and immorality, which we hit on quite a bit as we studied the Book of Judges.

Now, because of the people's sin, there was famine in the land, there was war in the land, and it really displaced a lot of the Israelites as they chose to leave the country that they lived in, their Promised Land, to go to other places simply, in their mind, for the survival of their families, so that they can have crops to feed their families by, so they had the trade routes to be able to sell the products that they produced there. So when you think about that, you understand that the Book of Ruth opens during that time. Famine is taking place and war is taking place. And the famine specifically is what drove Naomi and her family out of Bethlehem into the neighboring country of Moab. Now, Moab was a nation that did not in any way acknowledge Jehovah God. And yet you're going to find as we unpack the story that there were remnants of the Israelites who lived within the nation of Moab. Now, Naomi, you'll see, eventually returned with Ruth because she heard that the Lord had visited his people and then giving them food in Ruth 1:6, which leads her back then again to her homeland.

The time when the judges ruled began about 1450 B.C. until the time that Saul became king in 1000 B.C. So about a 450-year period there. In this record, we read that a famine forced a man named Elimelech, which in the Hebrew means “God is my king,” and his wife Naomi and their two sons to move from Bethlehem (Bethlehem, by the way, means ‘house of bread’) in the land of Judah to the land of Moab, which was on the east side of the Dead Sea. However, bad things happened seemingly immediately. Elimelech thought it was because of the judgment of God. But he died in the land of Moab. Now, Naomi was a widow at that point in time and she had her two sons to raise. The two sons got married, one to a woman named Orpah and the other to a woman named Ruth. But after 10 years from the death of Elimelech, the two sons died as well. Now, Naomi and her two now daughter-in-laws are left with no man in their life to help them provide.

And in this society especially, the men were the ones who worked in the fields. The men were the ones that provided as the women took care of the things in the home, the raising of the children, the making of the meals, the things that had to do with running the household well, so to speak. So all of them were dead. Elimelech. Can you imagine? Naomi goes to that land and loses her husband. And then within 10 years, not only does she pick up the joy of having two daughter-in-laws enter into her life, unfortunately not from the Jewish background, but daughter-in-laws nonetheless, but then she loses both of her sons. The three most important men in her life are all gone.

The famine and the death in the land were emphasized in the verses that we see following the announcement of the death of the sons. And it all came down to the consequences of God’s people rejecting the truth of God’s word that was given to them. And we’ll hit that theme over and over again. If you obey God, you will be watched over by God. When you disobey God, you’re judged by God. That’s not a health and wealth mentality because it doesn’t mean that we’re going to have mounds of gold. It doesn’t mean that we’re going to have no problems, that life is going to be “fair” in our mind. But it does mean that the hand of God will constantly guide and take care of us. Now, what Naomi didn’t recognize in her grief that turned to bitterness: that God was still there for her and her family, that God still was watching over them. And that’s the thing we need to remember even in the day and age that we live: that regardless of the challenges that we face in life, God is still there. God is still walking us through even the dark valleys as well as the amazing mountaintop times that are in our life.

So after the death of Elimelech and the two sons, Naomi makes plans to return to the land of Judah, from where they had removed themselves previously. God was providing for the people now in the land, her homeland of Judah, with food to eat, and things had calmed down politically. The famine had come to an end. She kindly gave her two daughter-in-laws the opportunity to go home to their parents’ land because they had shown kindness towards her, her sons, and also her husband before they had died. But the two women told Naomi that they would return with Naomi to her homeland. Naomi asked if they were expected to give birth to two more. Well, if she were expected to give birth to two more sons, that they could have husbands again. And she again emphasized, “Please, don’t come with me. Stay. Go back to your parents’ land. Find husbands again. You’re young. You have an opportunity to have a family and to marry, and that will never happen through my line,” Naomi said.

Ruth decided, though, not to leave her mother-in-law, but Orpah did and went back home to her family. And we never hear anything else about Orpah after that time. Even though Ruth's husband had died and Naomi gave the opportunity, Ruth felt that her commitment should be to her mother-in-law. She told Naomi that the Judean people would be her people and that Naomi's God, the only true God Jehovah, would be her God. Ruth refused to go back to her own family and the false gods which they worshiped and served, even though she may have found a new husband there. Plus, Naomi had given her the freedom of doing so, and she made a choice. Ruth decided that she was going to become a follower of the one true God. That must have been difficult, and yet it also shows the example that was set by Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons into Ruth's life, that even living in a nation that was anti-God, that had their own gods, they created an environment where Orpah and Ruth were impacted by the story of Jehovah God.

We never know the impact of us talking about the story of Jehovah God and how that's going to impact the people around us. And today, in the culture in which we live, it's not only talking about the hand of God, but we know about the rest of the story that they only knew was going to come. We now know what's happened: that Jesus came, that he died on the cross that we might have life. And we can institute that not only in our own homes, but in the people that we have an opportunity to influence. Ruth chose to follow the only true God as her God and to do what he would want her to do instead of what her natural family with their false gods would have wanted her to do.

So Naomi and Ruth, they return to Bethlehem about 1326 B.C. It was right before the year of the Jubilee began. And the women who had known Naomi were excited that she came back. There was a hustle and bustle. "Naomi is back!" However, also, they understood that bad things had occurred. And as a result of that, Naomi's attitude was affected in a very negative way. Previously, she had left with her husband excited about the opportunities but hesitant, and she came back a broken woman. She had returned empty, and therefore, she didn't want to be called by the name Naomi anymore, which represented being happy, sweet, and pleasant, but by a name which represented receiving bitterness. Being in a bitter situation, she took on a different name. Now she was back home in Judea with Ruth, and it was the beginning of the harvest time. And even though Ruth had a Gentile background, Naomi graciously allowed her to be with her in Judah worshiping the only true God.

Boaz was a man of ability and valor, and he was a kinsman or a relative of Naomi's deceased husband. And what Naomi was doing as she came back, and obviously, she was a little more aged, Ruth, because of her attitude towards Naomi, would go into the fields and try to find food that they could bring back. Now, one of the rules or the laws in the Old Testament that was placed in order to take care of the widows was that when the men would go through the fields and they would cut the stalks of wheat or when they would go and they'd pick the barley, whatever was left that they kind of spilled along the way, the widows were able to come in and pick up that, and that became food that they could eat. Naomi, not knowing that God was leading there, as Ruth went out, had Ruth end up in a field that was run by this man or owned by this man Boaz, not knowing he was a kinsman at the time, at least Ruth didn't when she went there.

Now, as we see her there and taking care of things, we find out pretty quickly that Boaz has an interest in her. Now, as the poor would gather the crops that were purposefully left during the harvest time by their owners, that was, again, as I said, in accordance to God's instruction, Ruth asked Naomi for permission to gather the leftover crops, and Naomi agreed. So there was an opportunity where there could even be more than they needed for their daily needs, but that they could have this extra to be able to take care of their continued needs. Boaz also came from Bethlehem, just like Elimelech did. We see that again in Ruth 1:1. And when Boaz arrived in the land, he noticed this woman, Ruth, and he asked about her. His servant gave a helpful response about who Ruth was and cleared up any misunderstanding that he may have had or not having a knowledge of her. It's interesting, though, to notice that Boaz and his workers were believers in the Lord God. They freely spoke about God to one another in their greetings. So Ruth had gathered enough food for herself and Naomi that lasts them for a few days when Ruth told Naomi whose field she was working in. Naomi said she was working for a man that was blessed by God, that he had received good things from God, that he had God's blessing on his life because of his obedience to God, and that God had not stopped being kind to them. I love that. You'll notice there was a crack in that bitter veneer that Naomi had, that she saw the hand of God even in her hurt and her heartache.

Now, this is the same root, I think you'll find interesting to note, with the word "kindly" that's in Ruth 1:8, which indicates kindness and benevolence and supplying what is appropriately needed for use in a specific situation, such as love and mercy. So Naomi told her who Boaz was in relation, a near or close relative known as a kinsman to someone else. And Ruth obeyed her and stayed in company with the young men working in Boaz' field during that time. Because, you see, once Naomi realized it was a family member, she knew the best place and the safest place that Ruth could be would be to be able to be in the fields of Boaz.

The time of the wheat harvest was named the Feast of the Pentecost, usually held at the beginning of the month of June. They called it the seventh Sivan in the Judean calendar. Now, Pentecost was an important feast for the children of Israel. The word Pentecost is taken from the Greek word meaning 50th because it was celebrated on the 50th day after the weekly Sabbath during the Passover or the Unleavened Bread Feast. Pentecost is sometimes called the Feast of the Harvest or the Day of the First Fruits or the Feast of Weeks. So there's several titles that are given to that.

Naomi was arranging to find rest for Ruth by settling down through the marriage and thereby the redeem aspect of what Boaz could potentially do. She was watching out for her, being a little bit of a matchmaker, knowing, "I got a sense something is happening here, so I'm going to start to do what I can to encourage Ruth to pursue this relationship to see what may happen," knowing that she then would be taken care of, that is, Ruth. But the residual is Naomi would be taken care of. But again, you see God working through Naomi, that she's recognizing that God is at work.

Now, the threshing floor was a flat and a hard surface that was on a bit of a raised area, and that's where they brought the grain that was to be beaten to separate the stalks, or oxen were used sometimes to tread over it, from the wheat. Then the people would winnow it by throwing it in the air so that the chaff, which was the part they didn't want, would blow away from the good grain which would fall back to the earth. So you can imagine as they would sometimes use rakes or shovels to throw it up in the air, the wind would blow through. Or even just by the nature of the air, the winnow, being white, would float around there as the grain would come back down and they could then separate it. They'd gather up the grain then that was left over to be stored for eating by the owner and his family or sometimes to be sold. It was a festive time, the time of threshing and winnowing. And the people rejoiced because they got to see the abundance of God.

How often do we take time, since we don't have that same harvest mentality? In our day and age, we eat food that can be grown in different parts of the world even, almost 12 months out of the year. You can have strawberries in December. You can have strawberries in June. You may pay more in December, but we have it year-round. We don't have those natural celebration times. What do you do, and what do I do in my life to make sure that we're celebrating the goodness of God on an ongoing way?

Now, during the days that Boaz was at his threshing floor with the grain and taking care of things with his other employees, Naomi gave instructions for Ruth to follow since Boaz was asleep, close to the grain during the nighttime so that they could protect it from people coming in to rob it. At that time, if you didn't put guards there, some could come in. Sometimes it was the poor that wanted more food. Sometimes it was another tribe that might be coming over. So they wanted to stay there until the grain was gathered, was stored properly with the guards and the places they put it, or taken to market and sold.

So what had Naomi told Ruth to do? She told him to go down there to the threshing floor at night. Now, Ruth didn't object, but agreed to do everything that Naomi told her to do. The outer clothing she would wear would conceal her identity until the appropriate time that she would reveal herself to Boaz. She also wanted to make sure that she could be dressed in a way where she wasn't necessarily not known by Boaz so he wasn't frightened by her coming. So you see that Ruth goes down to Boaz and he recognizes her. And she requested him redemption while demonstrating her submission to his will. Ruth was not to interrupt Boaz during his work, sleep, or his mealtime, but to be available for him at the time that God would open his eyes and would listen to her request. Naomi had told Ruth that Boaz would tell her what she should do. It was Boaz' decision how he would proceed from the time of knowing who Ruth was and what she was doing and hearing a request, all according to Naomi's instructions. Because up until this time, we aren't sure not just about the attraction there, but where it would lead to.

So what did Ruth do? She carried out the instructions to the letter of the law. She was quiet. She uncovered his feet as she was instructed, so that she could lie there. As Boaz awoke, he told her, once he heard what Naomi had to say, what she should do. In fact, the Bible records that he shook or trembled during his sleep and so he awoke suddenly, and only then did he realize that someone was sitting at his feet. Ruth didn't wake him up at all, but God did. In verse 9, [Ruth 3:9] in fact, you see above the word skirt, that could be translated as wing, indicating the part of the clothes that hung like a bird's wing, covering and giving protection and shelter. Ruth was requesting that same protection and shelter from him by way of marriage.

Now, Boaz showed us once again that he was a righteous man, and he behaved in a notable and admirable and honorable way. He didn't wrongfully take advantage of Ruth's situation. He recognized that she was telling the truth and told her his opinion regarding her. In verse 10, [Ruth 3:10] you see that the word kindness, which is the same root word in Ruth 2:20 and the word "kindly" in Ruth 1:8, are specific situations where you can also see that interpreted with love and mercy. While staying loyal to the true and only God and his word, we see that Boaz wanted to bless Ruth in a proper and honorable way.

However, there was a little glitch to it, a twist to the story, so to speak. He also knew there was a closer relative to Ruth than he was, and he therefore needed to go and make sure that this closer relative had an opportunity to redeem Ruth and Naomi and their land, by the way, that they own through Elimelech, that the women were entitled to live in if their husbands had died. So Boaz again intended to do what God would want him to do in this situation with Ruth, requesting redemption by a kinsman. He told her to stay where she was until the morning and he would do the investigation about the other kinsman who was closer in relationship and thus had the privilege of being the first to decide if he wanted to be the redeemer pertaining to Ruth's circumstances. Boaz said it must not be made known that this was the location during the night that he ran into her. Ruth was not to be telling anybody about what had taken place in order to make sure there wasn't gossip that was taking place because people would make assumptions even though things were done in an honorable way. And Boaz would go and find out what the opportunities were.

So what did Ruth do? She went back to Naomi. And when Naomi asked her about the circumstances, Ruth told her everything. Again, you see that unique relationship that shouldn't be unique, by the way, between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. There was no secrets at all between them. They both waited then on Boaz, relying on him to do the right thing from God's viewpoint. That's hard to do, isn't it? As they waited, what would happen? This other kinsman she didn't know about, what was he like? Was he kind? Was he benevolent? Was he godly as Boaz was? How many times do we struggle in the waiting to hear back possibly a test result from a medical situation, maybe an answer about a job, or even an answer about a resolution of a relationship that could be fractured, waiting patiently on God, knowing that he's got it in his control? Even if we don't like the answer, he's still in control. You see Ruth and Naomi, they both waited.

Boaz went to the gate, which refers to the area immediately outside of the gate of Bethlehem, where business transactions took place, legal proceedings, administrative or civic affairs. They were all done there at the entrance to the gate. When Boaz saw the close kinsman who had the right of redemption approaching him, he called out and asked him to sit down with him to discuss this matter. He also brought 10 other elder men to witness what would occur. In the context of the word “elders,” it refers to the fact that these men, when compared to other people in the city, would have more knowledge, wisdom, dignity, etc. They have proven themselves to be wiser men who could give advice, wisdom, and direction about business affairs and spiritual things within the community that was there. These elders were specifically assigned to being a part of the affairs in the city. That would include matters that were relative to God, but maybe perhaps just the things that were dealt with from person to person. These men were about to judge or make their decision regarding the redemption of Ruth and Naomi. Without their presence, the two men were relying on Boaz to do God’s intention, to do the right thing before God, as you see in Ruth 3:18. But he knew the wisdom of having these other men not only hear what was going on, but to be able to affirm the decision and hear the full outcome so that nothing was misunderstood.

Boaz told the close kinsman about the piece of land, a field that Naomi’s husband owned, and offered it to him by revealing or uncovering the information in his ear so that he could hear it. He gave him the opportunity to purchase it in the presence of the local people that were there watching the events unfold, including the elders. And as they heard it, he knew that they were the official witness of the transaction. The close kinsman said that he was willing to redeem the property, buy it back so that it would stay in Elimelech’s family, of whom Naomi was the widow and past childbearing age, instead of selling it to some other family. He was the one who had the first right of redemption, and the succession of the land was to occur among the male descendants. He wanted to purchase the field and retain it for his own inheritance by way of Naomi. Boaz, though, told the kinsman that there were some additional details that he should be aware of about acquiring the field, especially that Naomi’s daughter-in-law, Ruth, and her husband, Elimelech’s son, had died without a son, and therefore, he would need to raise children with Ruth, so as to produce a seed for not only Ruth’s offspring but for the offspring of Elimelech and carrying on the family name so that that son would ultimately get the inheritance.

Hearing that news, the kinsman that was closer than Boaz rejected that, saying that he already had an inheritance with his own family and that he didn’t want this to interfere with that, and then gave Boaz the opportunity to be able to step in and be the kinsman redeemer for Naomi and Ruth. And he did that excitedly. The close kinsman, as he rejected the land and the people, he demonstrated an intentional act to say no to that. And even you’ll see in the Scriptures there that he handed a shoe or a sandal as a sign of the decision of the transaction that was made. Boaz then took the property, but also the responsibility of having a child with Ruth and becoming her husband.

The time of the Year of Jubilee had arrived literally when this was done, plus in the figurative sense of redeeming both the land and the people back to God. The witness was complete. The attestation of the events were spoken and performed, declaring it and bringing it to light in confirming that the outcome was authentic and valid. All the people and elders attending said they were witnesses, and then they prayed to God regarding Ruth bearing a son, even though she had been bearing during her marriage with Mahlon, Elimelech's son, and regarding Boaz living with valor and having a name throughout Bethlehem. They referred even to Rachel and Leah, who bore 12 sons, and then the house of Pharez, which is referred to in verses 18 and 19 [Ruth 4:18-19] when Tamar boarded Judah in accordance with the laws of Judah to bear a legitimate child. Boaz legally redeemed Naomi and Ruth, taking Ruth as his wife. God gave Ruth the ability to conceive to Boaz, and she bore a son. Ruth recognized that this son was legally the heir of the whole inheritance and so allowed Naomi to raise him as her own grandson. What a great Year of Jubilee.

Naomi accepted and nursed him, calling his name Obed. And as the Scripture says in verse 17 [Ruth 4:17], Obed became the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. The prophet of God mentioned that. And David was born about 990 B.C. Plus, the Lord Jesus was in the line now of Ruth. Naomi was full again, full of blessings that God's grace had been poured on her through Ruth and Boaz and that town of Bethlehem. The 10 generations from Pharez to David are listed in that royal lineage of the king's family tree. The name of our true kinsman redeemer and king, the Lord Jesus Christ, would be made known not only in Bethlehem and in Israel, but throughout the whole world. And he would give eternal life to all of his people, no matter what ethnic background that they might have. What an amazing story as you consider what took place.

Now, the concept of the kinsman redeemer is important because it's a picture in Ruth of what Jesus Christ did for us. We were born in sin, but we were from the hand of God in creation. He made us, but we needed to be redeemed now. And just like Ruth needed someone to step in to save her and Naomi and the land that was Elimelech's, so Jesus Christ died on the cross, knowing that there was no other way for us to have redemption but through Jesus stepping in and giving a blood sacrifice of all of himself for our redemption so that we can have eternal life and claim our inheritance as the children of God. What a cool story for us to reflect on, not only historically, not only as a love story that's birthed out of despair and hopelessness, but also as a picture of what Christ has done for us. Ruth, small book with powerful implications for us even today.