

Ruth

Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and 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 the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

When I was in high school, I went to a non-church summer camp in Waupaca. One of the activities of the week was a four-fold competition, with contests testing our physical, mental, social and religious awareness and strength. The religious part of the competition every year was usually some sort of Bible quiz. I remember one year, one of the questions was to name the two books of the Bible named after women. So often in the Bible, even important woman with great stories aren't remembered by name. But for two of them, their entire stories are recorded in their own books. And those women are Esther and Ruth.

Ruth's story is not long – only four chapters. You can read the whole thing in 15-20 minutes, depending on your version and how fast you read. It's a wonderful story about loyalty and family. Her story starts with Naomi and Elimelech, a couple from Bethlehem. When a famine hits the land, they take their two sons and move to Moab, where there is food. After they

move, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi as a widow. According to Jewish tradition, her sons will take care of her. They become adults and take wives of their own – named Orpah and Ruthy. Unfortunately, however, both sons also die, within 10 years of their father. Not only is this devastating from an emotional point of view, but it's a problem for Naomi economically. Who is going to take care of her now? Who is going to support her?

When Naomi learns that the famine is over in Bethlehem, she decides to return. Best case scenario, she will find a relative to take her in. Even the worst case scenario isn't that bad, because according to Jewish tradition, people must care for widows. So regardless, Naomi will be cared for at some level. Because they are part of her household, her daughters-in-law come with her. But not too far down the road, Naomi realizes this is silly. Orpah and Ruth should return to their own homes in Moab.

When a young woman married, she left her family of origin – usually forever – and became a part of her husband's family. Even if her husband then died, she was considered part of that extended family. But Orpah and Ruth had never known their extended family. They didn't live in the greater culture and society their husbands came from, so Naomi's suggestion that they return to their birth families kind of makes sense.

Orpah takes the opportunity immediately and returns home. But Ruth insists that Naomi is her family, and she is going to stick with her. Even when Naomi protests and makes a strong argument. So finally they journey onward together. When they arrive in Bethlehem, they are an odd couple. Naomi has been gone for many years, and she returns as a widow who has also lost her sons. And with her is Ruth – a stranger and a foreigner to the Jewish culture.

Fortunately for both women, Jewish custom required that widows, orphans, and travelers all be treated with the utmost hospitality. In their case, it meant that they were allowed to glean

in the fields. What exactly is gleaning? Well, farmers naturally had the right to go out and harvest their crops. But as you might imagine, the techniques around this time were somewhat less efficient than what are available today. Bits of usable crop were left behind after the first harvesting.

So Jewish custom said that widows, orphans, and other poor people were then given ‘next dibs.’ They could follow behind the farmer to harvest the scraps for themselves. And that’s exactly what Ruth did. It was great to get food, but it could be dangerous if you were a young woman on your own. Not all the farmhands were gentlemen. And out in the fields, far away from anyone else, a woman could be the target of anything from obnoxious teasing to violence.

But Ruth lucked out. She ended up in the field of Boaz. Only later that night did she discover that Boaz was in fact related to Naomi. But that day, what she found out was that Boaz was a kind and protective man. When he discovered who she was, he invited her to share the food and water set out for his harvesters. He encouraged her to stay close to his women workers so that she would have the safety of being in a group. And when she was out of earshot, he told his laborers to give her special treatment, leaving behind some of the better grain, and even leaving some already picked and sitting on the ground.

Why in the world would Boaz give such special treatment to a stranger, moreover a foreigner? Ruth asks him that very question. He says,

I’ve heard all about you – heard about the way you treated your mother-in-law after the death of her husband, and how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and have come to live among a bunch of total strangers. God reward you well for what you’ve done – and with a generous bonus besides from God, to whom you’ve come seeking protection under his wings.

For some time, life continues with Ruth continuing to glean from Boaz’s fields.

Eventually, Naomi decides it’s time to get Ruth settled in with a new husband and family. You

may remember that the Israelites had a tradition known as covenant redemption. The concept was that if a woman was widowed before she had children, she could marry her husband's brother. Any children they had would be considered the children – and therefore heirs – of the first husband. In Ruth's case, her husband's only brother was also dead. But in that case, there were other relatives that could carry out this tradition. It sounds really strange to us, but you have to remember how important lineage, birthright, property and such were to the Israelites.

It turns out, Boaz is one of the relatives who is eligible to marry Ruth. So Naomi sends Ruth to a party Boaz throws. After the party, Ruth subtly and symbolically announces her willingness to marry him. The next day, Boaz sends Ruth away quietly with a gift of grain, and tells her he will resolve everything. The only hiccup in the plan is that there is one other relative who has the right of first refusal in marrying Ruth. So Boaz checks with him. While he would love to have the fields and property belonging to Ruth's first husband, he is already married, and having children with Ruth would confuse their inheritance. So he turns down the offer. Boaz then marries Ruth, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Actually, the book of Ruth ends with one of those 'begat' lists. You know, Perez begat Hezron, Hezron begat Ram... I skip those sections just like you. But if we didn't, if we actually read this section, we'd see that Ruth was great-grandmother to David – making her a direct ancestor of Jesus Christ.

DISCUSSION

At the beginning of our story, Orpah returns home while Ruth stays with Naomi. Why do you think they made the choices they did? Is one of their decisions more admirable? What do you think you would have done?

God isn't really mentioned in this whole book. Why do you think this story was included in the Bible? What can it tell us about God, or God's people, or following God?

