

## Ruth: Grace in a Dark Time

The book of Judges that we looked at last week seems to me to become more degraded, more debauched as you read through it. The stories are sometimes gross, some-times pathetic, sometimes tragic ... or all three. You get the feeling that this was one of the worst times ever to be alive.

And then you open the pages on the next book of the Bible, the next story -- which actually takes place during the period of the Judges -- and you read of faithfulness, of sacrifice, of love and commitment, and the world seems right again. It's amazing to me that the book of Ruth comes out of the period of the Judges. And it's such a God-story that this example of loyal love comes from a woman of Moab, another people group, a group often hostile to Israel. And it is also true to God's nature that this foreign woman would become the grandmother of Jesse and great-grandmother to King David. That's just how God works.

Let me read a passage from the New Testament before we dig into Ruth's story that illustrates this principle. It's from Paul's first letter to Corinth in which he describes the foolishness of the cross in the eyes of both Jew and Gentile:

*This "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength. Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy, when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And He chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:25-29)*

This is a spiritual principle. God works in ways that lead to the grace of humility in us; a humility that leads to appropriate worship and to a living dependence on Him. Without this principle at work, we could easily become proud and independent of God. We could easily come to believe that we can save ourselves, overcome evil, or become pleasing in God's sight. But God continually bends our thinking towards the things that are simple, that are weak and foolish, and through them shows His sovereign power and eternal purposes. Ruth is one more example of this principle at work and so let's turn to her story.

*In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a man from Bethlehem in Judah left the country because of a severe famine. He took his wife and two sons and went to live in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah.*

We saw last week that, during the time of the judges, Israel looked to Ba'al to provide them with rain for their crops. God had told them, in Leviticus 26:18-20 and in

Deuteronomy 28:23,24, that He would send famine on the land if they forsook Him and that's what they are enduring as this story opens. The word "Bethlehem" means "house of bread", but there is no bread because there is no reverence for Yahweh, and so Elimelech was forced to go elsewhere in search of food.

The name Elimelech means "My God is King" and the name Naomi means "to be pleasant". The names of the two sons most likely represent sickness or frailty that leads to early death. Although the author doesn't state this specifically, the suggestion is that Elimelech has lost faith in Yahweh and has devised his own solution for the problem of famine: not repentance, but removing himself.

This is the wisdom of man, even though his name meant "My God is king", he was the ruler of his own fate, and so he determined to head east of Jordan to the land of Moab. Moab was descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew, which is another story, but they had a history of antagonism with Israel and it's worth noting that only Elimelech sought refuge among this group of people.

*During their stay in Moab, Elimelech died and Naomi was left with her two sons. The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without husband or sons.*

The word used here for marriage is not the usual term, which is "to take a woman". Instead, the term used means to "carry or lift a woman" and is used elsewhere of marriage by abduction. That may not be the meaning here, but it is always a negative term and it was particularly used of Israelites who married foreign women.

One of the things we noticed in the book of Judges was how quickly Israel became accepting of the culture around them. After a generation had passed, they were involved in the worship of Ba'al and Ashtoreth. Here, Naomi allows her sons to marry Moabite women, something in clear violation of the laws of God. These women would have been brought up worshipping Chemosh, the god of the Moabites who was linked with the Semitic god Ashtar and worshipped along with Astarte, the fertility goddess we saw last week ... remember the Starbucks logo.

Their marriages lasted ten years and produced no children, something that would have been noticed in a negative light in that culture. And then Mahlon and Chilion die, and Naomi is left without a son to carry on the family name.

All of that history is covered without editorial comment in the span of five verses. The stage has been set for the drama of choice that Naomi's two daughters-in-law now face. Naomi has heard that God has been gracious to Judah and has blessed them with rain and good crops. So she starts off on her way home and both Orpah and Ruth start the journey with her:

*But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back to your mothers' homes instead of coming with me. And may Yahweh reward you for*

*your kindness to your husbands and to me. May Yahweh bless you with the security of another marriage.” Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept. “No,” they said. “We want to go with you to your people.”*

Naomi then explains the impracticality of that course of action and again urges them to return home. Orpah does so, but Ruth refuses:

*“Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back. I will go wherever you go and live wherever you live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. I will die where you die and will be buried there. May Yahweh punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!”*

Ruth makes a vow to Naomi that has all the strength of a marriage vow: “I will go wherever you go, live wherever you live, worship your God and die and be buried where you are. What God has joined together let nothing separate.” Well, that’s almost what she says. “May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!” “I pledge myself to you until death do us part.” In a period of history where Israel had become blatantly unfaithful to Yahweh, worshiping Ba’al and Asherah, forgetting their God’s love for them for decades before they call for help, Ruth from Moab demonstrates what love and faithfulness really are.

During the course of Naomi’s first speech, she tells her daughters-in-law that they have shown her *hesed*, which is a Hebrew word that is used in the context of covenant love. It is translated “kindness”, but it includes the ideas of mercy, faithfulness, grace, loyalty and kindness. In other words, it expresses the idea of devotion and lovingkindness that goes well beyond the requirements of duty. This is a word that is often used of God’s love for Israel and here it is used of two Moabite women and the way they have laid down their lives for Naomi and for the men in her life.

From Naomi’s second speech comes this phrase: “Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD Himself has caused me to suffer.” (1:13) Through this speech we see that Naomi has become bitter against God, that she blames Him for the grief that overwhelms her and that she doesn’t expect Him to do anything for Orpah or for Ruth. “You’re better off going home to your own people. You will more likely find a suitable marriage partner there and your life will be happier.” Naomi has no faith left. She has endured famine in the house of bread, she has been the exile in Moab, she has lost her husband and her two sons, and both her daughters-in-law are barren. She doesn’t blame any part of this on Israel, for their worship of Ba’al, on her husband for taking the family to the forbidden land of Moab, or on herself -- she dumps all blame on the LORD. Her state of mind and heart becomes even more obvious in the next scene:

*When they came to Bethlehem, the entire town was stirred by their arrival. “Is it really Naomi?” the women asked.*

*“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Instead call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but Yahweh has brought me home empty. Why should you call me Naomi when Yahweh has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy?”*

When Naomi says she went away full, she isn't talking about her stomach. Judah was going through famine; she was starving hungry. But, she had a husband and two sons; in that sense her life was full. And it is in that same sense that she is returning home empty; her husband and both of her sons are dead, there are no grandchildren, there is no hope left in her.

She recognizes that she is at the mercy of the LORD, that His will, whether it be for blessing or for suffering, is an irresistible force. She blames God, clearly, for the sorry state she is in, but there also seems to be at least a bit of recognition that He has found her wanting, that she is receiving His punishment or His discipline. At the end of this first scene, we are impressed with Ruth's love and loyalty, we are disappointed in Naomi's bitterness and deep regret.

From this point on in the story of Ruth, we see her joined by another noble and kind person, a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech. She works in his field as a gleaner, gathering what the harvesters leave behind. He notices her and looks out for her interests, offering her protection and provision. His name is Boaz and his role in the story will be as a "kinsman-redeemer". When he first shows concern for Ruth, she is overwhelmed with gratitude: "Why are you being so kind to me? I am only a foreigner." (2:10) Boaz' reply is important:

*Yes, I know. But I also know about the love and kindness you have shown your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. May Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully.*

There's a difference between Naomi and Boaz -- the man speaking to Ruth is a man full of faith, full of hope in God. He speaks a blessing to her because he is confident that God will bless a woman of such kindness, self-sacrifice and loyalty. He instructs the harvesters to leave a little extra for Ruth to gather and told them not to give her a hard time. When Ruth relays all this information to Naomi at the end of the day, Naomi is delighted, and also grateful because she knows that Ruth will be safe in Boaz' field. In a time when everyone does what is right in their own eyes, Ruth could have been in danger in some of the other fields.

The remainder of the story is how Ruth came to be the wife of Boaz through a complex arrangement whereby Boaz took the role of "kinsman redeemer". A widow who had no male heirs would see any property that her husband had owned pass on to another family. The land that Elimelech had owned could not be passed directly to Ruth, but she could maintain the family line and possession of the property if one of her father-in-law's close relatives would both buy the land and take her as his wife. Boaz was willing to do that, but there was another closer in line who had to be asked first. The other relative was willing to take the land, but not endanger his estate by taking another wife as well, so he declined and Boaz, as next in line, was able to follow through on his promise to be Ruth's "kinsman redeemer".

Then Boaz announced this, starting in v. 9:

*“You are witnesses today that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. And with the land I have acquired Ruth, the Moabite widow of Mahlon, to be my wife. This way she can have a son to carry on the family name of her dead husband and to inherit the family property.”*

This was the main role of a kinsman redeemer, to provide an heir for the family of a man who had died without an heir and to thereby make sure that the estate passed from this generation on to the next one within that family line.

Chapter 4, v. 13 reads like this:

*So Boaz married Ruth and took her home to live with him. When he slept with her, Yahweh enabled her to become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son.*

Remember that Ruth had been married for ten years and had not been able to conceive, but now, through the power of God, she is able to have a son.

The book ends in an unusual way, with a short geneology. Interestingly, they start with Perez, not his father Judah or his grandfather Jacob. Perez was conceived out of a union between Judah and Tamar, who was Judah's daughter-in-law, but whose family redeemer story hadn't ended well. Both her husband and then the brother who acted as kinsman redeemer had died and Judah wasn't going to let his only other son fall into that trap. So Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and was able to lure Judah into a relationship which produced Perez -- and here, in the book of Ruth, Perez is listed as the ancestor of the clan.

*Perez was the father of Hezron  
Hezron was the father of Ram  
Ram was the father of Amminadab  
Amminadab was the father of Nahshon  
Nahshon was the father of Salmon  
Salmon was the father of Boaz  
Boaz was the father of Obed  
Obed was the father of Jesse  
Jesse was the father of David. (4:18-22)*

And that's the end of the book of Ruth. But notice who is included but not mentioned in this geneology. We've already looked at Tamar, the mother of Perez, but another fascinating story is that Boaz' mother, the wife of Salmon, was none other than Rahab the prostitute who protected the Israelite spies who were looking at Jericho's defenses. God uses people whose hearts are turned toward him, even if they may have failed in other areas of life. He used Rahab, who expressed a faith in God when she told the spies, "I know Yahweh has given you this land" (Josh. 2:6). And He used Ruth, a woman from Moab, arch-enemies of Israel, but this one woman was of such fine character, so devoted and loyal, that she was what God was looking for, in a time when there was no king in Israel and everyone did what seemed right in their own eyes. That's just God's way. That's where we started today: "God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise." Why?

Because until we are humble, we're not really that useful to God. He chooses humble people, then causes the proud to be humbled through them ... isn't that amazing grace.

Ruth is a story of grace. Ruth herself shows grace to a bitter old woman who has lost all the hopes she had for her life. Boaz shows grace to an impoverished stranger to Bethlehem by becoming the kinsman redeemer for her and preserving her line. Grace is shown to a woman from a people group that the Israelites weren't supposed to inter-marry with, and God draws her into the family line that will eventually provide a home for His Son, Jesus.

The period of Judges was rough and tumble and not filled with stories of grace. This one comes unexpectedly into the history of God's people and it brings light and hope into a time that seemed very dark. What do we learn from it?

1. God is always working, even through the darkest periods of our lives. In the darkness of this time, He brings a woman from Moab who becomes the mother of Obed, the grandfather of King David. God was looking ahead to the man after His own heart who would be king. He was looking way beyond that to the descendant of David, and Ruth, who would be King of kings and Lord of lords. God is always at work.
2. God uses people who don't even know Him yet. His Word says that He raises up kings and brings them down. He raised up Cyrus who delivered the Jews back to their homeland to rebuild the temple and the city. Cyrus didn't know the Lord; and Ruth's only knowledge of Yahweh came from Naomi and her sons. But she was willing to say, "Your people will be my people and your God will be my God." She would get to know Him.
3. Look for signs of God's grace in the world around you. I know that we can be overwhelmed with challenges and discouraged by circumstances, but we need to be alert to what goodness and grace God is bringing into our lives, if for no other reason than to give Him thanks. Help each other to see the grace of God in their lives, because sometimes we just can't see it, we're so absorbed with problems. Let's inspire one another with visions of the grace that our God has lavished upon us.