

Introduction to Ruth

If finishing the book of Judges last week left you feeling a little uncomfortable, you are not alone. One reason I think I felt so uneasy was that the time of the Judges reminded me so much of our times today. Remember Paul said we are to be, **“children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”**

Even though Judges had a shining lights, it described a very dark time in the life of God's people, Israel. We were witnesses of the downward spiral of sin that characterized Israel during the days of the judges. We read repeatedly of this cycle of sin, where the people did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served other gods; how the Lord allowed the pagan nations around them to oppress them so that they would call out to God in their distress; how the Lord would send divine deliverance by raising up a judges to save them from their enemies and God would give a time of peace; and then how quickly they would sink to even worse sin. We concluded our study by examining their corruption of true worship which led to a moral collapse of the nation. The times of the judges were dark times.

And if you are like me, when Judges ended with the horrific details of chapters 19-21, you found yourself asking in the midst of all this depravity, “Where is God in all of this?” It might be the same question you are asking about all the depravity in our world today. Judges ended with its refrain, **“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”** Because everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes, sin was rampant and God's people had hardened hearts.

It leaves us wondering both then and now if things people will just continue to get worse and worse, or if there is really hope out there somewhere. It leaves us pondering whether a king will make the difference or not. The dark time of the judges leaves us wanting, longing for a better ending, hoping for a deliverer, perhaps for a king who would ultimately defeat the enemy of sin within us.

Maybe that is why God gave us the little book of Ruth. The first verse starts, **“Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled.”** The story of Ruth opens in the dark and tragic time of the judges. But it ends by looking forward to a better time and a king who would foreshadow the king of kings, Jesus Christ, the child born in Bethlehem, who would redeem His people from their sin.

The days when the Judges governed marked a time of apostasy, apathy, and anarchy, associated with idolatry, immorality, and war. Ruth is the story of one individual's faithfulness, in the face of national faithlessness and provides testimony to the truth that God graciously preserves a godly remnant who do what is right in the sight of the Lord even when the ungodly majority do what is right in their own eyes.

Ruth is a spiritual light during a time of spiritual darkness. Ruth displays purity in a time of immorality. Ruth features a pagan turning to faith in the one true God while the nation of Israel forsakes God to pursue pagan idols. Ruth illustrates love instead of the lust of Judges. Ruth demonstrates kindness while Judges displayed cruelty. Ruth is an oasis of righteousness in a desert of rebellion. Ruth contrasts the faithfulness of a Gentile alien against the faithlessness of God's chosen people.

In this dark hour in Israel's history, there lived a Jewish widow, a Gentile woman named Ruth, and a gracious and godly Jew named Boaz. They have much to teach us.

I'd like to do something a little different here this morning. Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13 (NASB), "**Until I come, give attention to the *public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.***" I want to follow that model this morning, but I'd like to switch up the order. I'm going to begin with teaching some important background information. Then we'll listen to the reading of God's Word and finally I will conclude with some exhortation as we apply some lessons to our own lives.

First, let me relate ten things to you that will help our understanding as we read the text:

1. Timing. As we said, the events of Ruth take place during the time when the judges ruled in Israel. Ruth bridges time from the judges to Israel's monarchy. Ruth covers about 11–12 years: 1) Chapter 1 includes ten years in Moab (1:4) and a brief time for the return to Bethlehem; 2) Chapter 2 spans several months of the barley and wheat harvest in Boaz's field (1:22; 2:23); 3) Chapter 3 includes one day in Bethlehem and one night at the threshing floor; and 4) Chapter 4 summarizes about one year in Bethlehem.

We don't know for sure which judge was ruling when this story takes place. But as we've already pointed out, the time of the Judges was a period in which God's people cycled through disobedience to defeat to deliverance. Because everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes, sin was rampant and God's people had hardened hearts.

2. Setting. We read in verse 1 that because there was a bad famine in Bethlehem, a man took his wife and two sons to live in the country of Moab. Famine was often a consequence of the deliberate disobedience of God's people according to Deuteronomy 11:16-17: "**Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you.**" We saw many times in Judges where Israel turned away from God and worshiped other gods. This famine could be a consequence of the sin of the nation.

3. Moab. Moab was a land of rich soil and adequate rainfall so this man traveled to a place where his crops wouldn't fail. This family would have traveled north to Jerusalem and then crossed the Jordan River at the fords by Jericho. Depending on where they settled, the trip would have been about fifty to one hundred miles and would have taken about a week. The Moabites were distant relatives of the Israelites being descendants of Lot's incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter (Genesis 19). Moab was an eternal enemy of Israel. In Numbers 25, we read that the Moabites led Israel into sexual immorality and pagan worship. Remember back in Judges 3 that the Israelites were forced to serve Eglon, king of Moab, for 18 years until the Lord raised up Ehud to deliver them from the Moabites. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 lays out some pretty strong words: "**No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. ... You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days.**"

4. Characters. The Israelite man's name was Elimelech and his wife's name was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. These two sons married Moabite women, one who was named Orpah, and the other Ruth. When we come to chapter

two, we're introduced to a man named Boaz, who was a relative of Elimelech. And in chapter 4 there is an unnamed relative who declines to redeem Naomi's land.

5. Situation. During their ten year stay in Moab, Naomi's husband Elimelech died and then later both Mahlon and Kilion also die. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are now widows. Widows in the ancient world had no social status and no economic means to survive. This would especially be true for Naomi, since she was an Israelite living in a foreign country. There was no Social Security system and she had no male protector or provider.

6. Gleaning. Gleaning was God's way of providing for the poor and destitute. In Leviticus 19:9-10 the Lord gives Israel these instructions: **"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God."** This explains what Ruth was doing in chapter 2 and it also reveals a little about the character of Boaz as a man who followed the Law and cared for the poor.

7. Kinsman redeemer. In Leviticus 25 the Lord told Israel, **"The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me. And in all the land of your possession you shall grant redemption of the land."** The land belonged to the Lord and he gave each family an inheritance of land to care for. The kinsman redeemer law ensured the land would stay in the family if it was lost or mortgaged to pay a debt if the family was in poverty. It seems that here in Ruth this law is combined with idea of the levirate marriage from Deuteronomy 25. If a man died and left a widow and no sons, his unmarried brother would be expected to marry his widow so that she could have sons to carry on the deceased brother's name.

8. Corner of covering. Chapter 3 will make you hold your breath and scratch your head. Ruth puts on perfume and her finest clothes and goes to the threshing floor where Boaz has been working. When Boaz falls asleep, Ruth uncovers his feet and lies down by his feet! When Boaz turns over in the middle of the night, he is startled to discover this woman lying at his feet. She identifies herself and then says in verse 9: **"Spread the corner of your covering over me, for you are my family redeemer."** This same word is translated "wings" in 2:12, when Boaz says to Naomi, **"May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully."** Ezekiel 16:8 uses this same marriage picture to describe how the Lord took Israel to be His own: **"When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord God.** Ruth is asking Boaz to shelter her under his wing and to redeem her. In short, she is making a marriage proposal to him!

9. Town Gate. In Chapter 4, Boaz goes to the city gates and sits down to conduct business. The gate of a city was like a courthouse, where transactions took place, and where cases were heard.

10. Sandals. Sandals were the ordinary footwear of the time, but were also symbolic in the relationship between a widow and her legal guardian. The giving of a sandal was like a signed contract back then, especially in cases where land was in dispute. This may have originated because someone would walk off a field in their sandals in order to measure it.

I hope those details will help us understand the context of this beautiful story of Ruth. Listen as I read the whole story to you, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart today:

Ruth 1

1 Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion--Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. 3 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. 4 Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. 5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread. 7 Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go--for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, 13 would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!" 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said:

"Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
17 Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The Lord do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me."

18 When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

19 Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" 20 But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Chapter 2

1 There was a relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech. His name was Boaz. 2 So Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain after him in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." 3 Then she left, and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

4 Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you!" And they answered him, "The Lord bless you!" 5 Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" 6 So the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered and said, "It is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. 7 And she said, 'Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.' So she came and has continued from morning until now, though she rested a little in the house."

8 Then Boaz said to Ruth, "You will listen, my daughter, will you not? Do not go to glean in another field, nor go from here, but stay close by my young women. 9 Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." 10 So she fell on her face, bowed down to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" 11 And Boaz answered and said to her, "It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before. 12 The Lord repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge." 13 Then she said, "Let me find favor in your sight, my lord; for you have comforted me, and have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants."

14 Now Boaz said to her at mealtime, "Come here, and eat of the bread, and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed parched grain to her; and she ate and was satisfied, and kept some back. 15 And when she rose up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. 16 Also let grain from the bundles fall purposely for her; leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her."

17 So she gleaned in the field until evening, and beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. 18 Then she took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. So she brought out and gave to her what she had kept back after she had been satisfied. 19 And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where have you gleaned today? And where did you work? Blessed be the one who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz." 20 Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead!" And Naomi said to her, "This man is a relation of ours, one of our close relatives." 21 Ruth the Moabite said, "He also said to me, 'You shall stay close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.' " 22 And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, and that people do not meet you in any other field." 23 So she stayed close by the young women of Boaz, to glean until the end of barley harvest and wheat harvest; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law.

Chapter 3

1 Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? 2 Now Boaz, whose young women you were with, is he not our relative? In fact, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 3 Therefore wash yourself and anoint yourself, put on your best garment and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 Then it shall be, when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies; and you shall go in, uncover his feet, and lie down; and he will tell you what you should do." 5 And she said to her, "All that you say to me I will do."

6 So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law instructed her. 7 And after Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was cheerful, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came softly, uncovered his feet, and lay down.

8 Now it happened at midnight that the man was startled, and turned himself; and there, a woman was lying at his feet. 9 And he said, "Who are you?" So she answered, "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative." 10 Then he said, "Blessed are you of the Lord, my daughter! For you have shown more kindness at the end than at the beginning, in that you did not go after young men, whether poor or rich. 11 And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you request, for all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman. 12 Now it is true that I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. 13 Stay this night, and in the morning it shall be that if he will perform the duty of a close relative for you--good; let him do it. But if he does not want to perform the duty for you, then I will perform the duty for you, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning."

14 So she lay at his feet until morning, and she arose before one could recognize another. Then he said, "Do not let it be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." 15 Also he said, "Bring the shawl that is on you and hold it." And when she held it, he measured six ephahs of barley, and laid it on her. Then she went into the city. 16 So when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "Is that you, my daughter?" Then she told her all that the man had done for her. 17 And she said, "These six ephahs of barley he gave me; for he said to me, 'Do not go empty-

handed to your mother-in-law.' " 18 Then she said, "Sit still, my daughter, until you know how the matter will turn out; for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day."

Chapter 4

1 Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there; and behold, the close relative of whom Boaz had spoken came by. So Boaz said, "Come aside, friend, sit down here." So he came aside and sat down. 2 And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. 3 Then he said to the close relative, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, sold the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech. 4 And I thought to inform you, saying, 'Buy it back in the presence of the inhabitants and the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know; for there is no one but you to redeem it, and I am next after you.' " And he said, "I will redeem it." 5 Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also buy it from Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance." 6 And the close relative said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I ruin my own inheritance. You redeem my right of redemption for yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

7 Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging, to confirm anything: one man took off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was a confirmation in Israel. 8 Therefore the close relative said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself." So he took off his sandal. 9 And Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, from the hand of Naomi. 10 Moreover, Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, I have acquired as my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brethren and from his position at the gate. You are witnesses this day." 11 And all the people who were at the gate, and the elders, said, "We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman who is coming to your house like Rachel and Leah, the two who built the house of Israel; and may you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. 12 May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring which the Lord will give you from this young woman."

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! 15 And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him. 17 Also the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, "There is a son born to Naomi." And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

18 Now this is the genealogy of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; 19 Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; 20 Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon; 21 Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; 22 Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

This is the Word of the Living God. Amen.

What a refreshing, hopeful, beautiful scripture after the horrors of the last chapters of Judges! Do you see why we need this little book of Ruth? I plan to spend four more weeks digging a little deeper into Ruth, one week for each chapter. But I want to conclude this morning by drawing three lessons from the whole of story Ruth.

1. Surrender to God's Sovereignty. One of the overriding themes of the Book of Ruth is the providential sovereignty of God. Providence is a great theological word that we don't use very much anymore, but it means this: God orchestrates all the normal events of this world to accomplish His purposes. The Lord is behind the scenes, weaving His purposes through the lives of people and events in Ruth. Circumstances like famine, death, Ruth happening upon the field of Boaz, their marriage—all of this was no mere coincidence! God orchestrated the events in order to accomplish His purposes.

Think about your life circumstances. Even when you are completely unaware of what is happening, or even why something is happening, God is working everything together for your good and His ultimate glory. Our responsibility is to surrender to His sovereignty. Instead of fighting our circumstances, to see them as God at work in our lives for our good.

Have you surrendered yourself to His sovereignty? Do you trust His purposes for your life, even when things look bleak? Have you discovered the glories of "God's happenings" in your life?

2. Cultivate your character. In the terrible time of the Judges, Ruth and Boaz stand out as people of faith and honor. Hard times do not have to lead to the hardening of your heart. God can use them to make you tender, humble, honorable—conforming you to the likeness of His Son.

Are you cultivating your character? Don't sell out, don't cave in, and don't bail on God.

3. Receive the Redeemer. Just as Ruth saw reality in Naomi's religion, and wanted it for herself, some of you are ready to receive the redeemer into your life. Ruth and Orpah help us see the options. They both had the opportunity to turn their backs on what they were worshiping and follow the true God. Orpah had started out to follow Naomi but then bailed. Many people do that today. They start out but never make a commitment to Christ. God doesn't want a half-hearted commitment. He's looking for people today who will say, "Your God will be my God." Are you ready to do that?

In the Old Testament, a redeemer must be related by blood, he must be able to redeem, and he must be willing. Jesus took on flesh and blood so that He could relate to us. He is able to redeem because He lived a perfect sinless life and paid the price for our redemption with His own blood on the cross. He is more than willing. Are you?

Are you ready to receive the redeemer? Do so right now.