

PREFACE

Somehow the ignorant of this world have concluded that the God of the Bible and, by extension, Christians today have a low opinion of the female sex—that they are to be second-class citizens, barefoot and pregnant, pushed down, under the heel of their husbands and men in general.

Nothing could be further from the truth. God's word is filled to overflowing with strong, honorable women. Through the stories we have from both the Old and New Testaments, through the counsel of the apostles, we have a picture not of subjugation, but of women who hold their own, who are very often *first* in faith. Last week we looked at one of those strong, brave women of faith: Rahab of Jericho. Now we turn to a most extraordinary woman—a widow who came up from a despised land, only to marry Rahab's son, Boaz.

The story of Ruth contains perhaps the most eloquent and moving speech in God's word. It comes at a moment in her life when she has known little more than tragedy, yet because of her newfound faith in Yahweh she demonstrates remarkable, unselfish dedication to Him—and to family.

BACKGROUND

To appreciate the fullness of God's grace to Ruth and the line of David, we must go back in time to examine—if only in outline form—the relationship between the two nations Israel and Moab. This takes us to the book of Deuteronomy. In Chapter 23 of that book, we are told not just that the Moabites and Ammonites would be excluded from the assembly of the Lord, but why.

Read Deuteronomy 23:3-4.

So then we must ask, who are the Ammonites and Moabites? This takes us back to Genesis. Abraham's nephew Lot ([son of Haran, Abraham's youngest brother](#)) was not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and reading his story one gets the sense that he never did become a true servant of Yahweh—that he was just riding on his uncle's coat tails. We see this in his flight from Sodom; though God did have a measure of compassion for Lot, He ultimately did not spare him and his family for his sake, but for Abraham's.

Read Genesis 19:29.

After his wife was killed by her disobedience, it was just Lot and his two daughters. Apparently they were as small-minded as their dad (and, by the way, many today, who think the world consists only of what they personally know), for with the destruction of Sodom, they believed all the men in the world had been destroyed.

Read Genesis 19:31.

Yet they had just left sanctuary in Zoar; didn't they notice any of the men there? In any case, over two nights they got him drunk and each of them in turn "lay with him." We do not know the names of Lot's daughters, but we do know the names of his offspring through them.

Read Genesis 19:36-38.

The land of Moab lay east of Israel, across the Dead Sea, and for most of their history the two nations had an uneasy, and mostly antagonistic relationship. The area of both ancient nations of Moab and Ammon is now modern Jordan, whose capital is Amman—the ancient (and Biblical) Rabbath-Ammon, capital city of Ammon.

DEVOTION

The time frame for the story of Ruth, as the text tells us in v1, is during the time of the judges in Israel. That is, a period of about four hundred years prior to the anointing of King Saul—a time when “there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). The story was *written*, however, some time during the later years of King David, or immediately after him.

Ruth’s future family was decidedly *not* one of faith—which makes her own faith later especially extraordinary. The parents were Elimelech (el-ee-meh’-lek) the father and a kinsman of Boaz, and Naomi the mother. They had two sons, Mahlon (mahk-lone’) and Chilion (kil-yone’). The name Elimelech means “God is king,” but he didn’t really live as if God was his king. They were Ephrathites of Bethlehem, but in a time of famine they did not place their trust in Yahweh, but chose to seek food elsewhere. They did not intend to *stay* in Moab; they meant to return to Judah once the famine was over.

That Jews would go to Moab was not unprecedented; in fact later David, when he was running from Saul, would take his parents to the king of Moab for safekeeping (1 Samuel 22:3-4). But perhaps that decision could be excused on the basis that, with Saul’s blood lust, there was no safe place for them in Israel.

It wasn’t long before Elimelech died. After that the two sons married Moabite women: Chilion to Orpah (ore-pah’); Mahlon to Ruth (4:10). The Mosaic law did not *explicitly*, by name, prohibit marriage to Moabites—although they *are* mentioned explicitly in Ezra 9, when the returned exiles were caught marrying foreign women—but the reasons it did prohibit intermarriage with Canaanites would certainly apply to Moab. Jews were to marry Jews, and these two marriages were another indication of the thin faith of Elimelech’s family.

Then the two sons died, leaving a household of three widows. This was not a good situation. There was no governmental support system; since Naomi was an Israelite and just a visiting alien, there would be no help forthcoming from a nonexistent network of friends and family. The only option for Naomi was to return—and a dangerous journey at that—to Judah, and her hometown of Bethlehem. So they set out, but did not go far before Naomi convinced Orpah to go back to her Moab home.

Read Ruth 1:14-15.

Do not think the less of Orpah. She was not cold-hearted. Both younger women were loathe to leave Naomi, and it was only after Naomi’s extended pleading and pointing out of the obvious that Orpah—finally, reluctantly—bade a tearful goodbye to her mother-in-law. In fact, Orpah’s perfectly understandable and logical decision to return to her native home supplies the contrast to the extraordinary decision of Ruth to remain with her mother-in-law. Her decision to remain with Naomi made no common sense, but revealed her uncommon quality of **devotion**.

Read v15-16a.

Have Linda read 16b-17.

Read v18.

Once the two women arrived in Bethlehem we see another indication of Naomi's rather thin faith.

Read Ruth 1:19-21.

Officially this study is about Ruth, but we can't pass this up. Naomi is so fixated on herself, and her own problems, she cannot even take comfort in being back in the bosom of her extended family in Bethlehem. She and Ruth have just completed what had to have been a dangerous, harrowing journey through mountain and desert, around the Dead Sea, through more desert, until finally rising into the hills of Judah. Instead of expressing relief, and thanksgiving to God for getting them through safely, she is still complaining about how God has been abusing her. She tells the women, "Don't call me Naomi [pleasant]; call me Mara [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me."

But we can't throw stones, can we? My guess is that every one of us has had a moment—or moments—like this. Things have not been going our way—one disaster after another. And we pout and whine about how God no longer appreciates us, how He has been mistreating us unmercifully. Our words may not be recorded in eternal Scripture (thank goodness)—perhaps they were not even voiced at all—but they at least rang out loudly in our thoughts. Let's refresh our memories—and our faith—with the wise counsel of the beleaguered but faithful Job.

Read Job 1:20-21.

And in a similar fashion he answered the *bad* counsel of his wife—"Curse God and die!"—with "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" Job did not whine and moan and shake his fist at God; no, he *worshiped*. (In a future session we will see a similar response from King David when his child dies.) If God is sovereign, He is sovereign over *all* things—the good and the "bad." And it is not up to us to determine what is bad; as Joseph told his brothers, who were fearful of his retribution,

"Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." (Genesis 50:19b-20)

To her credit, Naomi acknowledges the sovereign rule of the "Almighty" [*Shaddai*; the name of God the patriarchs knew before He revealed Himself to Moses as *Yahweh*]. But she still whines about how unfair it is.

INDUSTRY AND GRACE

Chapter Two of Ruth is like a breath of fresh air after the darkness and storms of Chapter One. And after the self-pitying behavior of Naomi in Chapter One, the mature, industrious behavior of Ruth restores a little of our faith in humanity. The younger woman is the flip-side of the slackers and layabouts in Thessalonica.

They arrived in Bethlehem at harvest time, and Ruth immediately goes out to glean behind the harvesters. This was standard practice at the time, part of the Mosaic Law.

Read Leviticus 19:9-10. (God's plan to assist the poor)

We will return to Ruth in our next session, but let's close with this.

Chapter Two of Ruth's story is filled to overflowing with **grace**. It is a beautiful story, and I wish we could take the time to read it all. Be sure to do that on your own. While you are at it, read every word of the entire story; it's not long.

I would suggest the first grace we witness in this chapter is the Lord's as He takes Ruth by the hand and leads her—what a coincidence!—right to the field of the one who will be her “kinsman redeemer”; Boaz is from the same clan as Ruth's late father-in-law Elimelech.

The second grace we witness is the gracious humility of Ruth as she gets right to work supporting her mother-in-law. Lacking a man in the family, she does what is necessary—and honorable—to put food on the table.

The third grace is that of Boaz. What a remarkable man he is—we will delve into this more in our next session. He is no doubt considerably older than Ruth (v8: “my daughter”), wealthy, a prominent and highly regarded citizen, and one of the kindest men one could meet. His kindness toward Ruth is extraordinary, quickly moving her from a simple scavenger behind the harvesters to working with the young servant girls bundling the sheaves. This would ensure she got more than the gleaners. He also tells her to help herself to the water—something else not normally offered to the gleaners.

Before there is any romantic interest in Ruth, Boaz shows grace by protecting her and feeding her. Why? Because of *her* grace shown to Naomi. Let's close with that.

Read Ruth 2:10-12.