

### **Ruth: A Journey of Love**

Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.  
Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.  
Obed was the father of Jesse.  
Jesse was the father of David the king.<sup>1</sup>

This section of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus closely connects Rahab and Ruth with each other and with David, known as a man after God's own heart and the most well-loved king of Israel. (We'll talk about one of his greatest shortcomings next week.)

Ruth's story offers us examples of a variety of life-giving relationships. We heard how the story begins. Recall what follows.

When Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem, Naomi instructs the women who greet them to stop calling her Naomi, which means "pleasant." Instead, they are to call her Mara, which means "bitter." "I went away full," Naomi complains, "but the Lord has brought me back empty."

Naomi has a prominent, rich relative on her husband's side, whose name is Boaz. Naomi encourages Ruth to go to Boaz's field to gather the grain left behind by the harvesters. Boaz notices Ruth there and is impressed. "I've heard everything you've done for your mother-in-law since your husband's death," he says. "May the Lord repay you for your sacrifices and reward you richly for what you have done."

When Ruth tells Naomi what Boaz said to her, Naomi instructs her to go to the threshing-floor where Boaz is sleeping and present herself to him. Ruth does as she is told.

After some negotiations with another relative, Boaz acquires Naomi's land and takes Ruth as his wife.

Think about the forces that cause people to abandon their homes and travel to a foreign place.<sup>2</sup> Today's story begins with basic hunger, the physical need for food. Moab isn't a friendly place for Elimelech, Naomi, and their family. In fact, there's great hostility between Israel and Moab. But living in Moab is a better alternative than starving in Bethlehem, so they readily travel there in an effort to feed themselves and their children.

However, this journey meant to save the family results in the death of Naomi's husband, and later on, her two sons. Naomi soon realizes that Moab isn't good place for her, a widow with no sons or grandsons living in a foreign country. She decides to return to Bethlehem, where even though life will still be difficult for a widow, at least she won't be a foreigner.

It makes sense that one of her daughters-in-law decides to stay in her home country of Moab. We're not sure what prompts Ruth to choose to accompany Naomi to a place where she will be looked at with suspicion, and even hatred. Perhaps she doesn't want to return to her own mother's house for some reason. Maybe she feels the need to put some physical distance between herself and the location of her deep grief of widowhood and childlessness. Certainly, her impassioned speech lets us know that she and Naomi have developed a deep bond she can't bear to break.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:5-6a, *Common English Bible*

<sup>2</sup> This sermon draws heavily from Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*, Herald Press, 2022, pp. 49-70, 155-156.

The force that drives this deeply bonded relationship is *hesed*, a multi-valent Hebrew word we talked about a few weeks ago when we considered the instructions in Micah 6:9 to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. *Hesed* is loyalty-love, covenant-love, love-with-a-promise. It includes mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, and benevolence.

It's the love that God extends to humanity, the love that is the fabric of human relationships and human community. It's found throughout Ruth's story.

Her pledge to Naomi is a beautiful and poetic expression of *hesed*.<sup>3</sup> Later in the story, *hesed* is the quality in Ruth that most arouses the admiration of Boaz.<sup>4</sup>

This love allows Ruth to overlook Naomi's negativity and bitterness when they arrive in Bethlehem. Naomi idealizes the past in Bethlehem, saying she went away full, when in actuality she left because of a famine. She claims she is returning empty, when in fact Ruth is with her.

Perhaps part of the reason Ruth insists on accompanying Naomi is because she recognizes what a fragile state Naomi is in. She knows it's unlikely that Naomi could have made the trip without her. Throughout the story, she does what she thinks is best to do – what she believes needs to be done – regardless of how Naomi and the people of Bethlehem perceive her.

At the same time, she doesn't neglect to care for herself. When she returns home from the fields with a large amount of grain, "she [brings] out what she had left over after eating her fill and [gives] it to [Naomi]."<sup>5</sup> She is generous with Naomi without neglecting herself. Self-care is not selfishness. Caring for herself gives her the ability to provide for both herself and Naomi, and eventually to be part of the family line that leads to Jesus.

The story of Ruth and Naomi begins with painful hungers of famine, dislocation, death, and abandonment. It ends with food, welcome, marriage, procreation, and community.

Throughout the story Ruth faces a variety of choices. What choices have you made in the past that greatly affected your life? What choices are you facing now? What factor most influences your decisions?

Perhaps it's loyalty – honoring commitments made to a person, a job, or an organization.

Perhaps it's longing – seeking the intimacy, connection, or affirmation we all need.

Perhaps it's emptiness – filling a void, meeting physical needs for food, shelter, money or mental needs for stimulation and learning.

Perhaps it's bravery – seeing something that needs to be done and doing it even though it's scary and difficult.

Perhaps love most influences your choice of what to do – the deep love Ruth had for Naomi and God has for us.

What has love prompted you to do? What sacrifices have you made that in the end don't seem so sacrificial? Because God's kind of love-with-a-promise doesn't use you up, it doesn't demand that you neglect yourself. Because God's kind of covenant-love brings with it a community who can lift us up when we are in a fragile state and can't make the journey alone.

As we continue our journey through life, let us proclaim our love for God and for each other. Let us receive and share the abundant love God offers to us through the coming of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth 1:16-17

<sup>4</sup> Ruth 2:11; 3:10

<sup>5</sup> Ruth 2:18, *Common English Bible*