

RUTH
"An Introduction"
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When you read the Bible what do you expect to have happen?
Don't you expect, when you read the Bible thoughtfully, that you will learn something or be reminded of something?

When you read the Bible WHO do you expect to hear from?
God, right?

In other words anytime we go to the Bible, which we refer to as the "Word of God" - we expect to hear from God - to learn from Him.

Most of us recognize, however, that God didn't literally pick up a pen and write the words of the Bible.

Instead as the Apostle Peter tells us, "men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke or wrote from God."

We believe God is the one who inspired the authors of the books of the Bible, that is that God was behind what the authors thought and wrote and behind it to such an extent that WHAT they wrote is what God wanted them to write.

So when we read the human author's thoughts we are reading God's thoughts.

By saying it that way, I have already assumed something else about reading the Bible.

When we read the Bible we not only expect to hear from God through the human authors, we also expect to understand what we hear from God - we expect God to communicate with us in thoughts that we can understand.

The Bible therefore is not like some modern art where the beauty is in the eye of the beholder or where the meaning of the words is only what you need it or want it to mean.

No, the Bible was written by real people who were attempting to SAY

SOMETHING by what they wrote.

They wrote in sentences and paragraphs or in poems or stories but always in order to communicate something intelligible - understandable.

Anytime we read the Bible, just as when we read a letter from someone or we read any other book, we read with the intent of hearing from the author what HE intended to communicate.

So we come to the Word of God to hear from God - to read what God wants us to know and do.

But how are we to understand what the Bible means?
Most of us either have been or are in school.

When we read a school text book we expect that the author will give an introduction to the book and even an introduction to each chapter laying out WHAT he plans to write about.

Then, in each CHAPTER, the author will spell out the major points of the chapter one after another building the case for what they are trying to convince us of.

And then they will usually conclude with a summary of what they have just written.

It is all very logical and orderly and relatively easily followed.
When you are done, if the author was good and you read carefully - you could say in YOUR words what the author has written and meant by HIS words.

But have you ever found yourself reading from other parts of the Bible and after reading a story or a parable wondering WHAT it was supposed to mean?

Maybe it was one of those parables of Jesus where the disciples didn't ask "What are you talking about" and neither Jesus nor the author, recording Jesus' words, bothers to directly explain what Jesus meant.

Or maybe you have been reading in the O.T. and you have read story after story about some king or another who leads an army or builds a city or has trouble with his family - and when you got done reading it, you wondered why that story was included in the Bible?

Well, the story of Ruth, in the Old Testament, presents that same challenge

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What are we supposed to learn when we read it?

What was the author intending to teach by it?

Why did the author tell the story and what did God intend to communicate by including it as part of the Revelation of God - the Word of God?

If you have ever read any of Aesop's fables or if you have read any of the modern collections of fables usually you will find the author or the editor making some comments either before or after the story that tells you what you are supposed to learn from it.

For example do you remember the story of The little boy who cried "wolf" several different times, when there was no wolf?

He soon found himself in real trouble and no one would believe him because he had exaggerated too often before.

The moral of the story is that our credibility is a character trait worth protecting - it's not only nice to be known as truthful but it is essential to get along in life and it might even save our lives some day.

But the short story about Ruth doesn't give us the moral of the story all written out at the beginning or at the end of it.

There's no author's or editor's comments attached to teach the moral or tell the purpose.

And when the purpose is not specified it will do us no good to attempt to discover what the author was trying to say through a story in the same way we would a text book or one of Paul's letters.

When we come to a story it won't be helpful to take each paragraph and ask

what it alone means we must hear the whole story and only with the whole story in mind can we then ask what is the author attempting to communicate.

And so again, we come to the book of RUTH, the STORY of Ruth.

What did the author intend to teach his first readers from this story?

And that is the same as asking, What did God intend to teach them as a result of this story and what does he intend to teach us?

When we read a STORY in the Scriptures, unless the author tells us the purpose, we must use the CLUES in the story to learn what the human author meant to communicate to the original audience.

So what is God teaching us through the book of RUTH?

Through the next three weeks I hope to show you from the CLUES in the story itself what it is the author intended his audience to learn.

I will, next week, show you that one theme prominently illustrated by the story has to do with the providence of God, the actions of God in the lives of ordinary people - God is in control even in the most seemingly insignificant lives and in the smallest details.

In 1:6 we read that "God had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them".

Do you think they believed God provided the food?

Do we believe that God is involved in the very provision of our food?

Or are those just quaint, superstitious ways of referring to luck, or just humble ways of referring to hard work by responsible people.

Do we believe God is in control even in the everyday details of our lives?

And if he is, do we also hold him responsible for the tragedies that come as well? One character in the story said "The LORD afflicted me; the ALMIGHTY has brought misfortune upon me".

How far does this idea of God's providence go?

So next week, I want us to look at the providence of God as taught through the story of Ruth.

Another theme that I will show you a week later is that loyal faithfulness, kindness, is a virtue that God rewards richly.

Faith and works may be two different actions but they are inseparably bound together on the pages of Scripture.

God honors faithfulness.

Christianity is not just a doctrinal system, believed, it is a life of faith, lived out in faithful ACTIONS .

And the last week, Dec 10, we will learn from this story about "God's redemption of his people" - How God is always working to bring about the salvation of his people.

Look at the last part of the 4th chapter of the story (4:16ff):

Here the author gives us a major clue as to this reason why he wrote the book.

One of the principle characters of the story was the great-grandfather of none the less than King David.

That's the last thing the author says in the story.

Now look at the 1st chapter, Vv 1&2 - I think it is very intentional that "Bethlehem" is mentioned specifically.

To the story itself it seems that the family could have been from anywhere in Israel and it wouldn't have been important to mention from where - but the author knew exactly what he was doing - Bethlehem is the town from which King David would come - David, the King who would redeem Israel - bring the nation back to peace and prosperity by bringing them back to God.

And so from the beginning of the book King David is in mind as he author tells the story - a clue to a purpose for the story.

Those, then are the three major themes we will look at over the next three weeks

But this morning, I plan to something I haven't done for several years. I

want to read this story to you.

This is one of the most delightful stories in the entire Bible. Great German and English poets of the past have called it the greatest short-story ever written.

One wrote that "no poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story."

In fact this story could be made into a great movie or it could be an excellent television show.

It has all the elements which make for a great story:

There is tragedy, suspense, honor, love, clever scheming, even a twist in the plot.

Just like any good story, even the better dramas on television, this one has a prologue (1:1-5) where the problem is presented then it has four scenes (chap 1, 2, 3, 4) before the concluding epilogue (4:13-22).

It doesn't even take much imagination to determine where you would put the commercial breaks in the story in order to keep the audience wanting to come back to hear what happens next.

Now as I read I want you to keep in mind the three themes I've already mentioned:

God's providential care of his people.

God's reward of loyal faithfulness and kindness.

God's salvation of all of his people as illustrated by his salvation of a particular family.

And now the story with only a little commentary to help understand some things that may be culturally unique: THE STORY OF RUTH.

"In the days when the judges ruled, (a time of political and moral chaos in the country of Israel) there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, (about six miles South of Jerusalem) together with his wife and two sons went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion.

They were Ephrathites (a prominent family) from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. (You'll find a map in your bulletin that shows where Moab was in relationship to Bethlehem - they probably traveled about 50 miles to their new home.)

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth.

After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

(Pause)

When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people (back in Bethlehem) by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead (husbands) and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "(No), we will go back with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become y our husbands?"

"Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband.

Even if I thought there was still hope for me (to have more children) - even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons - would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? "No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"

At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye BUT Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.

May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women (of the town) exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi", (Naomi) told them. "Call me Mara (which means bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full (with a husband and sons) but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi (which means pleasant)? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth a Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

(Pause)

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the (family)-clan of Elimilech, a man of social importance, whose name was Boaz.

And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." (She did this so they would have food to eat).

Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter."

So she went out and began to (pick up the grain that was dropped and left behind by) the harvesters.

As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimilech. (Interesting isn't it that the author keeps mentioning these family connections?)

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethel and greeted the harvesters,

"The Lord be with you!"

"The Lord bless you" they called back. (not your typical employer-employee relationship!)

Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?"

The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said (to us), 'please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.'

She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning until now, except for a short rest in the shelter."

So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."

At this Ruth bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found favor in your eyes that you notice me, a foreigner?"

Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband - how you left your father and your mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know

before.

May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

"May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant - though I do not (even) have the standing of one of your servant girls."

At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come, over here. Have some bread and dip in the wine vinegar."

When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over.

As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves (the piles of grain), don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks of grain for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening.

Then she threshed the barley she had gathered and it amounted to (over a half bushel).

She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over from lunch.

Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!"

Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said.

"The Lord bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead."

(Then) she added, "That man is our close relative: he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."

Now a "kinsman-redeemer" was a relative ("kin") who was responsible for helping poor relatives. The "redeemer" part was that they often had to buy back for the relative the land that a poor relative had sold to keep alive.

Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'"

Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed."

So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

One day Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for?"

Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours?

Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

(Though this is a clever plan by Naomi she is not asking her daughter-in-law to do something immoral)

"I will do whatever you say", Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered her feet and lay down.

In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over

me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."
(This was a proposal of marriage)

"The Lord bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor.

And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character.

"Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor."

He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town.

When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?"

Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty handed.'"

Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down.

Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of

my people. If you will redeem it, do so, But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.

"I will redeem it," he said.

Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."

At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)

So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." and he removed his sandal.

Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!"

Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife.

Then he went to her, and the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer.

May he become famous throughout Israel!

He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age.

For your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

This, then, is the family line of Perez

Perez was the father of Hezron,
Hezron the father of Ram,
Ram the father of Amminadab,
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,
Nahshon the father of Salmon,
Salmon the father of Boaz,
Boaz the father of Obed,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of David.