

Ruth Series 1

Three Funerals and a Wedding (Verse): The Sovereignty of God in the Circumstances Surrounding the Conversion of Ruth the Moabitess

Ruth 1:15-18

How is God using the difficult circumstances of your life – pain, illness, disappointment, poverty, bereavement – to unfold His perfect plan which is yet unknown to you? The answer lies within the Book of Ruth.

In his introduction to *his* first sermon in the Book of Ruth, Alistair Begg noted that James Campbell of the Times Literary Supplement describes David Foster Wallace's last novel as. "The supreme example of purposeful boredom in literary form." Alistair then makes this observation: "In stark contrast, the book of Ruth is arguably one of the most beautiful short stories ever written."

The Book is only four chapters in length and contains less than 85 verses.

Chapter One – A Series of Unfortunate Events

- A famine (v. 1)
- A desperate relocation (v. 2)
- Three funerals (vv. 3 – 5)
- An emotional separation (vv. 6 – 15)
- A fateful decision (vv. 16 – 18)
- A bitter return (vv. 19 – 22)

Chapter Two – The Plot Thickens: "Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's"

Chapter Three – The Plot Twist: "There is a kinsman nearer than I"

Chapter Four – The Surprise Ending: "There is a son born to Naomi"

The Book of Ruth is wedged between the books of Judges and 1 Samuel in your old testament and details events which take place during the dark times when the judges ruled Israel. The Judges ruled over a 180-year period from 1200 BC to 1020 BC. The period begins with the death of Joshua in Judges 1:1 and ends with the coronation of Saul in I Samuel 10. This was an era of frightful social and religious chaos.

Alistair Begg: "The book of Judges teems with violent invasions, apostate religion, unchecked lawlessness, and tribal civil war."

Upon first reading (or hearing) the story of Ruth, one might assume it is a tragic story with a happy ending which concerns a poor family in the long ago and far away, and has no implications for my life whatsoever. Such an assumption misses the mark.

A theological thread is woven through this story which has ramifications not only for our own salvation – but for all of fallen humanity. The story – as we will see in due time – rather than concerning only one family – is really about the vindication and validation of David as King. The story of Ruth reveals how the purposes of God are not thwarted by the disobedient decisions of his people or the bad things that may happen to them.

Remember that this story would have originally been told orally. The beginning of the story draws the hearer in, holding them in rapt attention, until the end of the story is revealed. Unlike us, the hearer did not have the ability to jump ahead to the end of the book to see its climax and resolution.

I. The Cast of Characters: 1:1 - 5

a. "They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah" (1:3)

- i. The Ephrathites were direct descendants of Caleb (of Joshua and Caleb fame) and his wife, Ephratah who gave birth to two sons who settled the town of Bethlehem (1 Chron 2:19, 50-51). In other words, Elimelech and Naomi were from an aristocratic family, but their change of fortune has made them sharecroppers in a foreign land.

- 1. Bethlehem means "House of Bread" and yet a famine overtakes the land, causing Elimelech to lead his family away from their homeland.

- 2. Micah 5:2

"But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah,
though thou be little among the thousands of
Judah, *yet* out of thee shall he come forth unto
me *that is* to be ruler in Israel;
whose goings forth *have been* from of old,
from everlasting."

- ii. Elimelech: "My God is King" and yet he shows an incredible lack of trust in his God by taking his family to Moab:

- 1. The progression of Elimelech's pragmatic decision:

- a. 1:1 "They went to *sojourn* there"
- b. 1:2 "They *remained* there"
- c. 1:4 "They *lived* there"

- 2. For Elimelech, pragmatism won out over obedient faith

- 3. The choices we make have repercussions not only for us, but those with whom we share relationships.

- 4. But as we will see, even the sinful choices we make ultimately are worked into the plan and purposes of God.

- iii. Naomi: "To be pleasant"

1. Alistair Begg: "Naomi means lovely, or pleasant, or delightful. She is confronted by experiences that are ugly, painful, and depressing."
- iv. Mahlon ("sickly") and Chilion ("pining" – to be mentally depressed, longing)
- v. Ruth: a Moabitess whose ancestry goes back to the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:37)
 1. Moab was located about 50 miles east of Bethlehem
 2. The record of its history in Scripture reveals a people with whom God was not pleased:
 - a. Moab was cursed by God and consequently Ruth was under that curse.
 - b. Moab was cursed by God because it was an idolatrous nation and rejected the true and living God.
 - c. Moab worshipped a god named Chemosh to whom the people of Moab offered their infants as sacrifices
 - d. In the period of the Judges, the same period in which the story of Ruth takes place, Moab oppressed the people of Israel for a period of at least 18 years (Judges 3)
- vi. Boaz: The Kinsman Redeemer (2:1)
- vii. The Mystery Redeemer (3:12)
- b. The Sovereignty of God in the Circumstances of Naomi and Ruth
 - i. 1:13 – Naomi: "The hand of the Lord has gone out against me";
1:21 – Naomi: "The Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me"
 1. **Three Funerals:** She is bereft of her husband and her sons: 1:3-4
 2. She is bereft of an heir because she is beyond child-bearing age: 1:11-12
 - ii. 1:8,9 – Naomi: "May the Lord deal kindly with you," "The Lord grant that you may find rest"
 - iii. 1:17 – Ruth: "May the Lord do so to me"

- iv. Alistair Begg: “The triple bereavement of Naomi led in the slow unfolding purpose of God to the conversion of Ruth, Ruth’s subsequent marriage and motherhood, the coming of David the king of Israel, and ultimately to the birth of Jesus Christ himself.”
- v. All of this would not have happened had it not been for a dramatic conversion on the road between Moab and Bethlehem.

II. The Scene on the Road Between Moab and Bethlehem: 1:8-18

- a. Ruth’s unlikely and dramatic conversion
 - i. Naomi urges her daughters in law to count the cost: **1:8-13**
 - 1. “Return to your mother’s house;” (v. 8) “Each find rest in the house of her husband” (v. 9)
 - ii. Ruth refuses to go back despite the urging of Naomi. Orpah did the expected and the sensible thing. Ruth chooses to abandon the known - the familiar - for the unknown. She gives up the prospect of marriage to cling to an ageless, hopeless mother-in-law.
 - iii. The mystery of conversion: one turns and leaves and the other uses the language of the covenant and says she cannot go back because she is no longer what she once was, no longer trusting in the gods of Moab.
 - 1. Ruth is using the language of the Hebrew covenant – the word of God!
 - a. Deuteronomy 7:9
 - b. Faithfulness demonstrated through loyal love – “hesed”
 - iv. How is God using the difficult circumstances of your life to unfold His perfect plan which is yet unknown to you? How is God demonstrating his faithfulness – His loyal love – to you in your circumstances?
 - v. God is reaching across barriers of race into the life of this Moabite girl and her picture is painted into the great scene in Revelation where her unlikely voice is blended with the voices of thousands upon thousands around the throne of a slain Lamb singing “You are worthy, because you have redeemed us by your blood out of every kindred, tongue, tribe, and nation.”