

THE MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE BIBLE SPEAK

5. Miriam, Aaron, and Moses were key leaders in Israel's escape from slavery. What does it say about Jochebed that she raised these three siblings who ultimately found their way back to each other to accomplish God's miracles? They were flawed, and prove that sibling rivalry was alive and well in biblical times. (Numbers 12) How does their story illustrate God's ability to work through flawed people?



RUTH AND NAOMI

(Book of Ruth)

NAOMI THE MOTHER

In *Women of the Bible Speak*, we considered Ruth's life in connection with the life of Tamar—another woman who knew what it was to be an outcast and a stranger, someone people despised and perhaps pitied. We saw beauty come from the mess that Tamar made when God redeemed her mistakes and wove her story into the lineage of Jesus Christ. In this book, we're going to view Ruth through the lens of being a daughter and the relationship she built with the woman who became her second mother, Naomi. Their journey together began in shared grief, but resulted in deep joy and deliverance. It started in earnest when Ruth took a true leap of faith, a bold step that led her away from her family of birth but into the promises of God and a new family.

Again and again in Scripture, we see examples of "found families." Adoption is a theme God beautifully illustrates for us repeatedly in the Bible, leading up to the adoption of Christians as sons and daughters of God.

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those

under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.
(Galatians 4:4-5)

The language is woven throughout the New Testament. In Romans 8:15, Paul encouraged new believers by reminding them that "the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship."

And, of course, Jesus's own story is one of adoption. He was known as the son of Joseph, but Joseph was His adoptive father—a man who took on a divine assignment that upended his life and called him to a challenging journey. Scripture indicates that Joseph was a good father to Jesus, keeping Him (along with His younger half-brothers and half-sisters) safe in Nazareth, watching over his family, and likely teaching Jesus everything he knew about the carpentry and building trades. All of the themes of adoption that run throughout the New Testament have roots in the "found family" stories of the Old Testament.

One of the most beautiful examples we get of a "chosen family" bond in the Old Testament is the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. The book of Ruth starts with the story of Naomi, one of heartbreaking loss.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. (Ruth 1:1-2)

Like countless families before and after them, Naomi and Elimelek had fled their home country, Judah, during a time of famine, searching for a better life for themselves and their sons. They appeared to find it in the nearby land of Moab, after what was about a fifty-mile journey. So, this family was away from the customs and traditions of their own people, living in a new land as outsiders, when tragedy struck.

Now Elimelek, 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 also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.
(Ruth 1:3-5)

Naomi, in a foreign land with two sons, lost her husband. The grief of becoming a widow in those times was exacerbated by the devastation of losing the family's financial provider. Though nearly all of Naomi's stability was shattered when her husband died, she had two sons. Both of them had married Moabite women, creating a new family unit and the possibility of precious grandchildren on the way. Naomi's grief over the loss of her husband had its consolation, because she had her sons—until she didn't. Both Mahlon and Kilion died.

Overnight, Naomi's situation became dire. Three men had been in the place of making sure she would be safe and secure, but not one was left. Naomi was bereft. With no husband or sons, she faced poverty and death in Moab. But then a glimmer of hope: Naomi received word that the situation at home had improved, providing the possibility of returning to her own land.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she 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 you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." (Ruth 1:6-9)

We see something of Naomi's faith here, because she heard "that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them" (Ruth 1:6). Notice that Naomi attributed Judah's recovery from famine to God's action. At the heart of her story, although Naomi was grieving, she could see God's hand in her own life and in the lives of her people. So she stepped out in faith: she packed up to take her weary, grief-stricken heart back home to her people.

As much as Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth needed one another, Naomi selflessly stopped to think of her daughters-in-law and the life they could still have—complete with family, children, and the security of a new marriage. This trio of women had suffered so much together, and that must have bonded them deeply. It's understandable, then, that the two young women didn't want to abandon Naomi to fend for herself. The best hope that Ruth and Orpah had for a prosperous life—for any life at all, really—was to stay in Moab, where they could find new husbands among their own people. What possible chance did these two Moabite

women have of finding husbands in a country where they would be strangers and immigrants? For Orpah and Ruth to pledge to stay with Naomi was an act of extraordinary love.

The actions of her daughters-in-law hint at what kind of person Naomi must have been, generous of spirit and loving, leading the three of them through devastating sorrow and loss. For both her daughters-in-law to desire to remain with her in their widowhood instead of returning to their own families suggests Naomi must have been a remarkable individual. Orpah and Ruth were willing to risk their own futures, and leave behind their own country and their own families, just to stay with her!

Too often our society feeds us the poisonous narrative of the critical, unpleasant mother-in-law—the jealous or overbearing mother-in-law, the nosy mother-in-law, the hostile mother-in-law. But that does not reflect the experience of many women. For many of us, the mother we adopt in marriage becomes a cherished part of our lives, and in many cases she becomes as important to us as our own mothers. I certainly won the mother-in-law lottery myself. Jouetta Bream and I have the most important things in common: faith in Christ and an unwavering love for her son, Sheldon. But we couldn't be more different as individuals! She can whip up a feast for thirty people in an afternoon without glancing at a single cookbook, and I can... well, boil water. She raised six kids and made it look easy. I struggle to keep our lab, Biscuit, on track!

I remember early in our marriage when I was a young attorney, feeling overwhelmed and working around the clock. As we chatted on the phone she'd occasionally ask what I was making for dinner. I felt attacked because everyone knows Sheldon didn't marry me for my cooking, but I soon realized she was just

trying to make conversation with her new daughter-in-law, not point out my lack of domestic talents. We bonded over what we did share in common: a love for Jesus, Hallmark movies, books, sweets, *her* cooking, and that amazing son of hers.

What joy it must have been for Naomi, mother of two boys, when they welcomed two daughters into the family. The Hebrew word for daughter-in-law is *kallah*, and it's a complicated word. It's sometimes translated as "bride," and it is used in that sense in the romantic imagery of the Song of Songs. But the root of the word *kallah* is *kalal*, which means "perfected" or "made complete." A daughter-in-law is not just a bride for the son, but she adds to the entire family unit. Naomi's daughters-in-law were her family, and for her to leave them behind in Moab would be to leave a part of her heart there as well.

In the touching and beautiful scene of Naomi's departure, we can see the family bond these three women had forged in their shared grief and mutual affection. Because she loved her daughters-in-law, Naomi was unwilling to let them sacrifice themselves in this way. She urged them to "go back" (Ruth 1:8), and she underlined the command by telling them to return to their homes—the homes of their birth mothers, not of the mother they had adopted. *Start your lives over*, she was telling them. *Go home and get remarried. Coming with me makes no sense.*

But Orpah and Ruth refused to listen.

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "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 your husbands? Return home, my

daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—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 turned against me!" (Ruth 1:9-13)

Naomi was clear: there was nothing for Orpah and Ruth down the road she was about to travel. There is some wordplay involved in verse 13, because Naomi's name means "sweet" or "pleasant." It is the opposite of "bitter" (*marrah*), and she was being frank with them that only bitterness awaited her in her homeland.

We see Naomi's generosity here too. Naomi had a long, hard, and dangerous journey ahead of her, and it would have made sense to take the young women along for companionship and safety. Certainly Naomi would have been less lonely, less afraid, if they accompanied her. The perils for a woman traveling alone during that time are hard for us to imagine. For most of us, unpleasant travel means a bored toddler or long TSA checkpoint line. Naomi would have been risking something altogether different. The trip would have been a challenge even with a man along to protect her, but a solo woman would have been exposed in totally different ways. Yet Naomi did not request, or even accept, Orpah's and Ruth's help. Instead, she made the selfless choice of pushing them away. And Naomi's orders were obeyed... almost.

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, 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 even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. (Ruth 1:14-18)

Even though Naomi urged her to turn back, Ruth refused. Many people look at this passage as an example of beautiful earthly love, and they are right. But what about looking at the passage in another way—as a model for evangelism? Naomi was the first person in this story to talk about the Lord, and that became a consistent theme in Naomi and Ruth's relationship. She reminded Ruth that going back home would mean going back to "her people and her gods" (Ruth 1:15), but Ruth was persistent. She wanted to go with Naomi, and she wanted to worship Naomi's God. In the ancient Near East, religion was very closely linked to nationality and a people's culture. Ruth was consciously leaving all that behind and clearly choosing to align with the God of Naomi and her people.

So often when we think about evangelism, we assume we need to prepare a three-point presentation, quoting Bible verses and complex points of theology to convince someone to accept Christ. But evangelism isn't always about a polished presentation or theological defense. Sometimes, it's just about being with another person—spending time with him or her, building a relationship, living out our faith in front of that person, and talking

about God in the natural conversations that arise. It's easy to see how that could have been what happened as Naomi and Ruth, walked through some valleys together, both literally and figuratively!

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly why Ruth chose to leave her gods for the God of Israel, but apparently there was something about Naomi that caused Ruth to want to follow her God—perhaps it was the way Naomi trusted God even in difficult times, or maybe Ruth watched Naomi worshipping the Lord and realized that there was something very unique about her God. Whatever the reason, we know that Ruth's relationship with Naomi was strong, and it drew her to want to follow the Lord. What if we adopted this as our model of evangelism—living out our walk with the Lord in such a way that our lives are constantly communicating His hope and truth? It was her devotion to Naomi that led Ruth to make one of the greatest declarations of love in the Bible: "Your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

And this was more than just adoption; it was Ruth choosing to leave her own people and land. She then became a child of Israel, bringing her Moabite heritage into the family of God. It was a heritage her great-grandson David would later remember, for when he went on the run from Saul's armies, he sent his family to shelter in Moab (1 Samuel 22:3-4). Ruth's conversion is a beautiful example of how God intended Israel to influence the world—as He said in His promise to Abraham, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3)—and an early example of the sort of evangelism Christ would command His church to carry out. From this point on, Naomi and Ruth were no longer just mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; they became

mother and daughter. Ruth had declared that Naomi's people were hers, which meant that Naomi was now her mother, in every sense of the word.

When the two women made their way back to Bethlehem, Ruth asked permission from Naomi to glean in the field of Boaz, Naomi's wealthy relative. Gleaning was hard work, the process of going behind those who had reaped the crops in order to pick up anything beneficial they'd left behind.

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." (Ruth 2:1-2)

We can see both Ruth's deference to the authority of Naomi and also Naomi's blessing of her decision with the phrase "my daughter." These two were doing life together as a family unit, as incredibly challenging as it was.

RUTH THE DAUGHTER

At this point in the story, the focus moves to Naomi as a mother and her plan for the women's survival. Ruth was obedient—faithful in her willingness to fulfill what Naomi had in mind. But before we look at that plan, we should look a little bit more at the relationship of these women with God.

In the first chapter of the story, Naomi mentioned the name of God five times. She blessed her daughters-in-law in the name of the Lord, telling them, "May the LORD show you kindness, as

you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me" (Ruth 2:8). She then prayed that the Lord would grant them future prosperity and new husbands (Ruth 2:9). Finally, when her daughters-in-law resisted leaving her, she told them that staying with her would be a losing proposition for them, because "the LORD's hand has turned against me" (Ruth 2:13). It can be hard for us to track in English, because we are used to thinking of the terms *God* and *Lord* as interchangeable in Scripture, but in Hebrew they are very different terms.

When we see the name *Lord* in the Old Testament—most often in small capital letters as LORD—we are seeing not a translation of the original Hebrew word but a substitution for it. The word that lies behind "LORD" is the Hebrew word best rendered in English as YHWH, and sometimes we see English approximations of that as "Yahweh" or even "Jehovah." The word *God* is not specific to the people of Israel; after all, all the nations around them had gods, in the sense of a generic word. Egypt had gods, Canaan had gods, Moab had gods; every place had its own unique god or gods. But the name YHWH is the personal name of Israel's God—a name so holy, so revered, and so specific that even to speak it aloud came to be seen over the centuries as a sign of disrespect. This practice is still followed by devout Jews of all sorts today, and the personal name of God is translated as "Adonai" (meaning "my lord") or just as "Lord," as in most Christian translations.

Why is this important? Because Ruth used the very specific name of God—the name of Naomi's God, of Israel's God—when she told Naomi that she would not leave her. Ruth had already told her that Naomi's God would be her God, using the generic name for any deity. But then she said, "May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me"

(Ruth 1:17). The word that she used there—LORD—is the word YHWH. She invoked the very name of God, as only a devout Jew would do, and in doing so, Ruth made it clear that she was joining herself not just to Naomi but also to the people of Israel, as a devoted daughter of both Naomi and the God of Israel. All of this is important because it places God at the center of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. Their love for each other was deepened by the faith they came to share. It was not biology that united this mother and daughter pair but their faith in Yahweh, the Lord God—the God of her ancestors, in the case of Naomi, and the faith of her mother, in the case of Ruth.

So faith was at the center of this mother-daughter relationship, and the strength and power of adoption (of a new faith and a new family) is at the core of their story. With that faith, these two women—alone and powerless, without any means of support—were strengthened and protected. As believers we are grafted together and into a spiritual family, a place where we are immediately and forever bonded to those who share our faith. There must have been times when Naomi wondered whether her daughters-in-law would embrace her faith or continue on with the gods they'd been raised to worship. As she stood there on the road back to Judah, she might have thought, *Ah well, it's too late now*. But that was exactly the moment when God moved in and captured Ruth's heart. The moment that is just beyond despair is often the moment when God acts—in Ruth's and Naomi's lives, in the lives of Jesus's disciples, and in our own lives too.

So what happened when Ruth and Naomi—bonded first by marriage and then by faith—committed to each other and their

trust in God? Well, for one thing, they attracted the notice of a kind, generous man who shared their faith, and also happened to be a relative:

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!"

"The LORD bless you!" they answered.

Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to?" The overseer replied, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She came into the field and has remained here from morning till 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 the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." (Ruth 2:4-9)

The very first thing we hear Boaz say is the name of God. He greeted the men working for him with a blessing, showing us that he was a man who carried God with him into his daily life and work. Watch too the way that Boaz honored Ruth in the way he first addressed her. The men in the fields might have dismissed her as just "the Moabite" (Ruth 4:6), but Boaz knew better. He knew that Ruth was a daughter of Israel, and his own relation through Naomi. As a man of faith, Boaz fulfilled the command

of Scripture to care for the stranger by extending generous hospitality to her.

Ruth may have been both surprised and curious about why Boaz was so kind and protective of her.

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner" (Ruth 2:10)?

Boaz didn't see her question as an opportunity to brag about what a godly person he was. Instead, he shone the spotlight on Ruth, and the humble, devout daughter of Israel *she* was.

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 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." (Ruth 2:11-12)

The wording of that last phrase uses the Hebrew word *kenaphaim*, which you can find all throughout the Old Testament. It paints the picture of the way a bird gathers her babies close to her for protection, just as God does with His children. Ruth was in that same position, and she expressed her deep gratitude for the kindness of Boaz for his part in that umbrella of grace. He then gave her even more.

"May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your

servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants."

At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it 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, "Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." (Ruth 2:13-16)

When Ruth returned home that night, she told Naomi about this man's extraordinary kindness to her—the way he had provided food for her (which she shared with Naomi) and made sure that Ruth had an abundance of leftover grain to glean. When Naomi asked the man's name, she was overjoyed to learn that it was Boaz. In fact, Naomi called him "*our* close relative" (Ruth 2:20), once again making sure that Ruth (and the reader) understood that Ruth was now family. Once again the name of God was invoked by Naomi in blessing:

"The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law.

"He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redemers." (Ruth 2:20)

The phrase translated here as "guardian-redemer" is an odd one. You'll sometimes see the phrase "kinsman-redemer" used

as well. We don't have any equivalent in English, but the idea is that the nearest relative had a responsibility to assist a family member in trouble, primarily in the context of redeeming or buying something back for someone in need. These were prosperous, financially stable men with standing in their community. Often the word is simply translated as "redeemer" in English. Of course, Naomi and Ruth lived in a time when, if the poor had no one to help them, they starved—which frequently happened. In order to prevent that, Jewish law (Leviticus 25:25-55) set up a system of accountability, so that families would be obligated to help their own—even distant relations.

Scripture talks a lot about the role of a "redeemer," and God Himself is often identified in the Old Testament as "Redeemer"—rescuer of the people of Israel. The Psalms refer to God as "my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:45), and Job at the end of all his trials said, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth" (Job 19:25). But when we talk about a "redeemer" in terms of the law—the kind of legal redeemer Boaz was—the context is one of obligation and responsibility. Boaz was *expected* to do right by these women if there wasn't another closer relative able to step up. He took that kindness far beyond duty, making Ruth feel accepted and welcomed.

We can see the same devotion in the way Ruth protected and served Naomi. As a widow herself, Ruth was under no obligation to abandon her own life in Moab to provide for her mother-in-law. In fact, the expectation of her Moabite society was just the opposite. Naomi was a foreigner heading back to her home and away from all of Ruth's roots. When Ruth acted to "redeem" her mother-in-law from poverty and abandonment, she was acting only out of love. And Naomi's commitment to Ruth returned

the affection. When Naomi learned what Ruth had gleaned in Boaz's field, she urged her not to wander off elsewhere: "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else's field you might be harmed" (Ruth 2:22). The two women were dedicated to each other, bound together by shared sorrows and joys—not any legal duty. Their communities dictated no framework or expectations obligating them to one another.

Scripture is always pointing us to the ultimate Redeemer, who ransomed us not out of obligation but out of unconditional love.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, *who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.* (Titus 2:11-14)

What a glorious display of love. Christ, perfect and unblemished by sin, came to earth and suffered enormous pain to win back every single one of us. He didn't wait until we were worthy; He knew we never could be!

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

The poverty and despair that Jesus redeems us from is our own debt of sin. His rescue plan for us has nothing to do with

money. He gave Himself. God acted as our Redeemer, solely motivated by His love for us. No law or court told Him to pay the price for us. Ruth's choice to actively embrace Naomi and her people solely out of love is a perfect Old Testament foreshadowing of the extravagant sacrifice Christ would display on the cross centuries later.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER TOGETHER: BETTER THAN SEVEN SONS

So how did their story, one that began with such heartbreak and loss, ultimately play out? Naomi and Ruth, mother and daughter by choice, wound up with blessings beyond what they could have imagined. Naomi's maternal instincts on behalf of Ruth were strong. Remember Naomi's impassioned plea that the young widow go rebuild her life? Ruth's bold choice to follow Naomi and join her people led them somewhere altogether different. And in those new circumstances Naomi saw a way forward for Ruth, the selfless daughter-in-law who had abandoned her own hopes in order to protect her.

One day Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in 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."

"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. (Ruth 3:1-6)

To the modern reader Naomi's idea can read as . . . strange. Or worse, it can seem overtly sexual, which it was not. Naomi was not urging Ruth into a compromising situation. Uncovering a man's feet and crouching at them was a way for a woman to place herself under his protection—a sort of act of submission. It was saying, *Here I am. It's up to you whether you're willing to assume this role*. But Naomi's plan showed humility and discretion, because the entire plan hinged on its secrecy. Imagine this scene if it had taken place in front of the gates of the city, where all public business was conducted. Boaz may have felt guilty or coerced into committing to Ruth. She and Naomi didn't want to put him in that position; instead, they quietly and privately reached out to the man who had already shown them so much generosity.

Boaz would have a choice to make, and that's a constant theme running through this little book of just four chapters. Isn't it amazing how much is packed into these few pages? So many of the themes of Scripture are here: the presence of faith, the power of adoptive love, and the importance of free choice. Ruth and Naomi chose each other and pledged to meet their enormous challenges together. Boaz had a choice too. If he accepted the idea of being Ruth's protector in marriage, then he would do so free of any public pressure. He could have sent Ruth away, and no one would ever have known it had happened. Discretion was an act of generosity from Naomi and Ruth. They invited Boaz to decide freely whether he would take on such a serious obligation, and he did! Happily, of course, Boaz gladly accepted Ruth's offer.

We see mother and daughter conferring afterward, and Ruth accepting Naomi's wise counsel of patience:

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." (Ruth 3:16-18)

It is such a human moment: the daughter excitedly relating everything that has happened, and the mother saying, *Wait now, slow down; let's not get ahead of ourselves*. In this short exchange, we can really see their relative ages and how completely they have become mother and daughter.

Naomi of course was right: Boaz did settle the matter immediately. He took their private agreement of the threshing floor into the public space of the city gate. There he publicly proclaimed himself the protector of Naomi and Ruth by announcing that he would buy Naomi's husband's ancestral property from her. Here we see a little bit of Boaz the clever businessman too. Naomi had another kinsman, a relative closer than Boaz, and Boaz very generously offered this man the opportunity to buy the property. At first, the closer relative was eager to do so. *But wait*, Boaz said, *there's a catch*.

Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man's widow,

in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property." At this, the guardian-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." (Ruth 4:5-6)

The full package, Boaz explained, was that along with the land came the lovely Ruth the Moabite. That meant the purchaser of the land would also have to marry Ruth and allow his firstborn son by her to be counted the heir of her dead husband, so the line of Naomi's husband Elimelek would continue in Judah. I can picture the man's face as it all began to sink in. *Ohhhhhh*. He hastily bowed out and let Boaz assume the responsibility.

It is interesting to note the reason the man says he "cannot do it" (Ruth 4:6): because he might "endanger his own estate"—meaning that if his children by Ruth were counted as the grandsons of Elimelek, then they would inherit both his land and Elimelek's. The relative's own estate might get swallowed up in Elimelek's, and he did not want that to happen. Preserving the family name and lineage was paramount in those times, something men would have been highly motivated to do. And while we don't know that man's name, we do know the names of all of Boaz and Ruth's descendants, including the most important one: Jesus Himself. Even if in the short term Ruth's children were named for Elimelek, it was Boaz's righteousness and generosity—and Ruth's courageous conversion and loyalty—that left the legacy we still remember today.

The story ends as it began, with Naomi and Ruth.

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, 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 guardian-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 in her arms 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. (Ruth 4:13-17)

Is it possible to read the end of the book of Ruth and not feel tears of joy? It's truly a love story, though not solely in the conventional sense. It's the love of a young woman whose heart was devoted to her mother-in-law, and whose mother-in-law cherished her as a true daughter. They tied their survival to each other and to God, watching as His provision unfolded in the most unlikely way. I've always loved that, in a society that prized sons in so many ways, the women of Bethlehem celebrated Ruth's worth as more than that of seven sons! The foreigner, the woman, the convert, the adopted one: all the things that made Ruth an outsider wound up being the characteristics that made her extraordinary. One day, that little hamlet would become famous for being the birthplace of her great-grandson, called the city of David.

There are two things that we should note about this beautiful ending to the story of Ruth and Naomi. The first is the presence of *faith*, Naomi's from the beginning and then Ruth's by deliberate choice. It anchored their relationship and kept their eyes

firmly on the God of Israel, the truest Redeemer. The gift of a son for Ruth was rightly ascribed as a gift from the Lord, and these blessings had their origin in God.

The second thing to note is Naomi's relationship to her precious grandson, Obed. When the Bible tells us that Naomi "took the child in her arms and cared for him" (Ruth 4:16), that doesn't mean just that she did all the things a loving grandmother would do. Obed was the continuation of the line of Elimelek, something Naomi had probably feared was lost forever. Naomi had lost her husband and her two sons, but this newborn son provided what she may have given up on long ago: a family legacy and fresh hope. Ruth and Naomi's bond united them so profoundly, so powerfully, and so completely that the joys of one became the joys of the other.

Love changes things, but the biggest thing it transforms is *us*. Ruth and Naomi were sustained through life's darkest hours by their devotion to each other. They were different people, from distinct places and backgrounds, but their love united them on a fundamental level. "Naomi has a son!" proclaimed the women of Bethlehem in joy. But we know God provided that miracle—which would echo through the generations—by first providing Naomi a treasured gift when she needed it most: a daughter.

Lord God, our Guardian, Protector, and Redeemer, we thank You for the gift of motherhood and daughterhood. We praise You for the mothers and daughters in our lives. May we notice all the ways You are always working to bring the miracle of love into our stories. Help us to love selflessly like Ruth and guide lovingly like Naomi.

Remind us that our mothers and our daughters are not always related to us by blood and that together we can support each other through all of life's challenges. May our love bring us the same unity of spirit and faith that Ruth and Naomi shared, and grant us the gift one day of rejoicing with them in Your heavenly kingdom.

Ruth and Naomi Study Questions

1. What does the Bible tell us about the beauty of adoption both in Ruth and Naomi's story and in the New Testament language about Christian believers' adoption into the family of God? (Galatians 4:4-5; Romans 8:15)
2. How much of a sacrifice and commitment was Ruth making to Naomi in the well-known words she spoke in Ruth 1:16-18? Why do you think these words are so often used in marriage ceremonies today? How did Ruth's actions also demonstrate her devotion?
3. Ruth modeled great humility. How does God honor that in her story, and how can He use it in our lives? (Ruth 2:11-12; 3:3-4:17)
4. What sacrifice did Boaz make in taking Ruth to be his wife and in the birth of their son, Obed? Where is Obed in the lineage of Christ?
5. What can we learn from the commitment Ruth and Naomi made to each other and how we as Christian women can develop spiritual motherhood and daughterhood in our lives? Is there someone in your life you could develop this kind of relationship with?