

The Old Testament book of Ruth begins with death, disgrace, abandonment and a critical decision. The prophet Samuel, the presumed author, ends this divinely-inspired short story with life, a new identity, love and the promise of God's eternal kingdom. All of this drama is covered in a mere 85 verses. Ruth is a hero of faith in that she willingly denounced her home country and pagan religion, faced an uncertain future in Israel at the side of her mother-in-law, all because of her devotion not only to Naomi, but most especially to the one true God. For this act of selfless faithfulness we have a holy obligation to praise the Lord for His mighty work through lowly Ruth, and yet, God is doing much more through this young woman than giving us a good example, or a dramatic love story.

The story of Ruth is also a genealogy, a family tree. A crisis of huge proportions lies just under the surface of this little book of the Old Testament. When Naomi's husband and sons die, there is more in trouble than just an inheritance of land and carrying on the family name. God made a promise to the family line of Judah that He would provide the promised Messiah as their own flesh and blood. Naomi's husband Elimelech is Judah's direct descendant. Once he and his sons die, where then will our Savior come from? How then will the world's history get to King David and the realized promise of eternal life in God's kingdom? As Abraham, with his heart still beating with anxiety, said to his boy carrying the wood he was destined to burn on, God Himself will provide the lamb for sacrifice, my son, so also, with this drama, now with Abraham's successor to the

promise on the line, God Himself will provide the unbroken family tree. Matthew chapter one points this out: the foreigner Ruth is listed there as an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Her marrying Boaz is accomplished in order to fulfill God's will that ultimately brings forth the Redeemer of the whole world.

What a monumental weight to place on anyone's shoulders! Not to mention a woman who was born outside of the Lord's people. As a Moabite woman, Ruth had inherited not the promise given to Abraham, but rather her bequest consisted of the series of unfortunate events that came to Abraham's nephew Lot. I will remind you of the history, from Genesis 19. Hundreds of years before the time of Judges, Lot had separated from Abraham and chose to live in the fertile green valley, while Abraham and his flocks roamed the barren hills [Genesis 13]; he then had to escape Sodom and Gomorrah when those places were destroyed. His wife looked back and became a pillar of salt, and he and his daughters ended their days living in a cave out of fear. Why he does not join back together with Uncle Abraham, the Bible never tells us. His daughters felt alone and desperate living in that cave, even though Lot had catechized them always to be faithful to the Lord, even while they were living in that faithless smut-pot of homosexual sin (and heterosexual prostitution too) known as Sodom. They felt, nevertheless, that the only way they would have children would be if the seed (to put it mildly) came from their own father. And so, they may have escaped the fire and brimstone, but sin's curse still got the best of them from within their own hearts, and the

consequences of their critical choice pulled them away from God's gracious promises. Each daughter had a son, one called hers by the name Ben-Ammi which means "son of my father", who became the father of the Ammonites, but the elder daughter had a son named Moab, which means "from the father." The Moabites descended from a man whose dad was also his grandpa! That's certainly no proud pedigree for Ruth to brag about as a Moabite woman. Her people became despised enemies of the people of Israel, much like the Samaritans were during the time of Jesus. It wouldn't make sense to carry on the royal line of the Messiah with horribly sinful baggage like that.

But Ruth, as a young widow walking along with her widowed mother-in-law, was not concerned about anything that made sense. She had a sister-in-law named Orpah who listened to Naomi's tearful urgings to go back. Ruth wouldn't budge. Not a hope existed for her to get another husband of the same blood as the deceased. Even if Naomi should have a baby late in life just like Sarah and Abraham did, would Ruth wait to marry a man whom she would likely help Naomi raise from infancy? Impossible! Yet Ruth clung on, she made a critical decision, reciting a solemn vow that called down God's very judgment upon herself if she should break her promise. The best anyone could imagine would be a life of poverty for two widows who only have the support of each other. Not a smart plan for the future; any professional advisor could tell you that.

What faith would be worth anything if it is not tested, tried and purified by the difficulties that you face, the crosses that you bear in this world? If for this life only we have hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, we are to be the most pitied. For you aren't a

Christian to make your life in this sinful world any easier. It may be quite easy to talk about "blind faith" but it's a whole other thing to make those hard life decisions and carry it out. All the sensible advice in the world can't justify or cover up the sinful, selfish desires that come to you naturally, like they did to Lot's daughters. Sure, you're impressed by the faithfulness and dedication of someone like Ruth, but when it comes to those critical moments in our lives, haven't we acted as the children of light that we are only at the times when it suits us? Think of the man with whom Boaz confers in Ruth chapter 4. This other man was the one who was better suited to redeem, that is, buy back Naomi's land and keep it in the family. And he was ready to do it, until he hears of the obligation to marry Ruth that went along with it. That wouldn't help his investment strategy. He would have to put up his own inheritance to purchase property that won't end up passing on to his heirs after all. It's too risky, so he gives up his right to Boaz. Let him take the hit. Not only Ruth, but Boaz also in this account, decides to act by faith rather than by sight.

So Ruth and Boaz marry, without regard to sense, in spite of better judgment, and without guarantee of any measurable success. But God has been working in this all along; He always has the bigger picture in mind. He works all things together for your good as well. For as the genealogy of Ruth attests, their marital union was blessed and the family tree of King David was preserved. And from David's line would be born the Messiah, the great Redeemer, Jesus the truly Faithful One who has made foolish the wisdom of this world. He poured out in sacrifice not only His heavenly inheritance as the Son of God but also gave His very life on the wood of the cross that He carried up

the hill of Calvary, not too far away from Moriah, the hill that Abraham and Isaac had climbed centuries before. Jesus, the lamb of sacrifice whom God had provided in love from the beginning of creation, came to earth for you and suffered terribly for your sake. Though you find yourself counting the cost and often selfishly following good worldly sense, He set it all aside so that He could redeem you for His very own. You were bought at a price, and when our Lord rose from the dead victorious, He pulled you out of your sinful human family line of death and claimed you as His pure, forgiven bride, washed in baptismal water and given a new name as a child of God.

Like Ruth's ancestor Lot, you also have been vindicated in your trials and struggles. They are not as meaningless as you had feared. Those disgraceful, last days where Lot and his daughters lived alone in a cave eventually brought about a loving, faithful young woman who was devoted to the Lord, and through her the estranged branch of the family tree rejoined that of Uncle Abraham, after all. The disgrace you may have to bear temporarily because of the name of Christ will be exchanged for heavenly, permanent and unfading glory. The critical decision lies now in your hands: repent of your selfish sins and cling forever to Jesus, the Son who truly came *Mo-Ab* "from the Father," He who was the despised and rejected Moabite descendant. For He who described Himself as the Good Samaritan, a merciful hero albeit despised and rejected of men, He clings to you without turning His back. He promises to feed you His own flesh and blood so that your faith in Him will not go hungry, in this, your Bethlehem, your house of life-giving bread. And when your pilgrim journey on this earth comes to its end, your Savior, your bridegroom, will be

there, ready to lavish you with an everlasting restored family inheritance beyond your mind's ability to comprehend. What a happy ending to your story that will be!

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.