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# ***EQUIP***

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## **RUTH**

*The Redeemed Bride and the Lord of the Harvest*

October - November 2009



# RUTH CHAPTER 1

## **1.1 Introduction**

The book of Ruth is a historical book set at the time of Judges. The events take place roughly three thousand years ago.

There are many themes that could be drawn from this book. Loyalty, selfless love, redemption and restoration to name a few obvious choices. But there is a deeper theme that underlies the historical text and the actual events that took place. A prophetic theme that points forward to events a thousand years later and beyond.

For the main characters in this book, Ruth the redeemed bride, and Boaz the Lord of the Harvest, reflect Christ and the Church. Thus, like all the rest of Scripture, this book's primary purpose is not to inform our minds about historical events that fill in a picture and set a scene of what is to follow, but to speak directly to us about our Lord and our relationship to him.

*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4 NIV)*

It should not surprise us that an Old Testament historical book can speak to us about Jesus. For Jesus, on the Emmaus road used **all** the Old Testament to talk to his disciples concerning himself.

*And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in **all the Scriptures** the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27 ESV)*

Ruth is also significant in the role she played in the Kingdom of Israel and of God. For together with Boaz she would produce a son who would be the grandfather of David, the great king of Israel. And, of course, this means she is also an ancestor in the natural lineage of Jesus.

It is a book of inspirational hope. This destitute widow from an enemy land with no right or inheritance among the people of God, is brought near and blessed beyond all expectation. She finds not only protection but provision. She not only receives blessing for herself, but becomes a source of blessing and rejoicing for others. She comes not just to fill a place among God's people, but to fulfil a purpose in that people's destiny, to bring forth the greatest Kingdom. It thus speaks of our own redemption in Christ, where we who were far off have been brought near and blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ to be part of his kingdom purpose in the earth.

It is also a timely book. Chapter one ends with Naomi and Ruth arriving in Bethlehem just as the time of harvest was beginning. It is the plan of God to restore and prepare a people, to be ready at just the right time - the time of harvest. This is a book that has much to say to the church in the time of harvest, and since that is the time God desires for his church today, it is indeed a timely book to read and to study and to allow the Lord to speak to us from.

## 1.2 A Time of Famine

*In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. (Ruth 1:1 ESV)*

The book starts off not in a time of harvest but of famine. This is significant, because it is this pressure that causes the departure from Bethlehem and the journey to Moab. Whilst with the benefit of hindsight we can see how events finally turned around for good, it is obvious that this particular decision did not work out well for Elimelech or his sons!

It is important how we respond in a time of "famine." It's easy to have faith and to stay in a good place with God when everything is working out fine. But when there is a lack, when there is a pressure, when it seems that we don't have all that we need, all that we expected, all that we wanted. How do we react? Do we remain in faith, keeping ourselves in the place of promise, or do we wander off looking for alternative means of provision outside of the will of God?

The land of Israel was the land of promise for the people of God. It is where God had promised to bless them and provide for them. It was to be for them a land flowing with milk and honey. Moreover, Bethlehem was a town of promise within the land of promise. Its name literally means *House of Bread*, so again it spoke of God's promise of provision.

*I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. (Ps 37:25 NIV)*

It was also of this town that the prophet Micah would speak saying:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)*

And it was in this town that both the promised king, David, and the promised Messiah, Jesus, would be born. So although Elimelech and his family were in a time of famine they were in a good place - a place of promise, a place of provision, a place of blessing in the purpose of God.

Unfortunately they didn't stay in this good place and wait in faith for God to provide. Instead Elimelech makes a decision that takes both himself and his family out of the blessing of God and into the place of compromise.

## 1.3 Handling Financial Pressure

The scriptures contain both examples for us to follow and warnings for us to avoid. Elimelech is one of the warnings. When the famine came his faith wavered, and instead of trusting in God he trusted in his own resourcefulness to find a solution to his problems another way. Even to the extent of leaving the land of promise and going to Moab, a country known for its wickedness, immorality and opposition to the purposes of God.

To apply the lessons to our own situations, we need to consider how we react when times are tough financially. These are our "times of famine." And although these are times of pressure, these are not times to stop doing what we know to be God's will concerning our finances.

Naturally speaking, it is easy to be tempted to stop giving generously to God and to others when money is tight. But we know that being generous is God's will for us, and his eternal principles of sowing and reaping means it is actually part of his way of providing for us.

*One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. (Pr 11:24)*

Equally a time of financial pressure is not the time to stop tithing. It might seem like an obvious solution to the problem, but it is taking ourselves out of God's will for our lives, and there is no blessing outside of the will of God. It is far, far better to have 90% with the blessing and promise of God than to have 100% outside of the will and purpose of God. What good will the extra 10% do us if it is not blessed by God. And consider the widow's oil in the time of Elijah the prophet; even a very little can go a long way if it is blessed by God.

*If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy (Ro 11:16a)*

Money gained by any means outside of God's will won't do us any good. It may seem tempting to save money by using pirated software, copied music, or illegally downloaded movies, or to make a little extra by exaggerating expenses claims or tax returns, but what blessing will that extra money be, that we saved or gained, if we obtained it unrighteously? Unrighteous money in our pockets won't do us any good. It won't make our situation any better, in fact it will only make it worse.

*Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. (Pr 10:2)*

Even a time of famine in the place of promise is better than all the riches of Moab!

*Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked. (Ps 37:16)*

So if it's not good to be caught with unrighteous money in our pockets, how much worse is it to be caught with God's money in our pockets? And if we know it is wrong to keep for ourselves what belongs to our fellow man, how much more should we be diligent not to withhold what belongs to God. It is good to have a healthy fear of God in these matters. Not a paralysing fear that stops us doing what we should, but a healthy fear that stops us doing what we shouldn't. To have too little fear can be as damaging as having too much. The reason God created fear, was not to terrify us, but to keep us from places and situations that would cause us harm. The tithe teaches us to fear the Lord in the right way in the area of our finances, and keeps us from wandering into Moab!

*You shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God, at the place where He chooses to establish His name, the tithe of your grain, your new wine, your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and your flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. (Dt 14:23 NASB)*

## **1.4 The Significance of Moab**

If the land of Israel and the town of Bethlehem represented being in a good place in the will of God, it is even more apparent that Moab represents being in a bad place outside of God's will and into all sorts of compromise.

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The land of Moab was named after one of Lot's sons. He was conceived in sexual immorality, when Lot's daughters, frustrated by not having husbands, decided to sleep with their own father! The results of their ungodly union were Moab and Ben-Ammi, and their descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites, had a history of opposing the people and purpose of God. More than any other nations they came to represent all that was contrary to God's will.

*No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever. (Dt23:3)*

When the Israelites came out of Egypt and made their journey towards Canaan, they had to pass by the land of the Moabites. The Moabites opposed them and hired Balaam to curse them<sup>1</sup>. They soon discovered, when all of Balaam's curses turned into blessing, that they could not curse those whom the Lord has blessed<sup>2</sup>.

Realising that they had no power to destroy the people of God, the enemy resorted to another tactic: to get them to destroy themselves! Balaam and the Moabites instead tempted the Israelites into committing sexual immorality, and the wrath of God that broke out upon them as a result, killed twenty-four thousand people!<sup>3</sup>

*Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. (Nu 31:16)*

*But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. (Rev 2:14)*

It was into this nation that Elimelech took not just himself, but his whole family! It was a decision that led not to the blessing he sought but to death. He started the journey because of compromise, and his sons were to follow in his footsteps. If his error was to compromise under financial pressure, his sons' errors were to compromise in the area of their relationships by taking Moabite wives.

## **1.5 Righteous Relationships**

Here again we must distinguish between things that are worked for good, and things which are good in and of themselves. God works all things for good, but that certainly does not mean that all things are good. Clearly we discover that Ruth was a worthy woman, and her relationship with Mahlon was obviously one of the steps in her coming into the fullness of all that God had for her. But does the ends justify the means? Were Mahlon and Chilion right to take Moabite wives for themselves?

Given the history between the two countries and the role that sexual relationships played during the Exodus, it is not surprising that Joshua gave very specific instructions to the people not to become involved in relationships with these nations.

*Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God. For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on*

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 22

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 23:8

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 25:9

*your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you. (Jos 23:11-13)*

It is sobering to note how many times a compromise in the area of relationships has led to the downfall of a man or woman of God. It is true in recent history, and it is true in the eternal Word of God. David fell when he indulged his feelings for Bathsheba (even though that relationship would also be part of the lineage of Christ, it is clear that God in no way condoned David's actions!) Solomon's relationships with his many foreign wives was also his downfall. Samson was finally taken by the enemies of God and his people when he succumbed to Delilah. So before thinking that we have a special case and that we can manage where others have not, perhaps we should pause and consider if we are wiser than Solomon, more devoted than David, and stronger than Samson? The good example we have in the scriptures is that of Joseph, who when faced with a compromising situation, ran away. This is the one area of our walk with God where running away is the path to victory.

*Keep your way far from her [the forbidden woman], and do not go near the door of her house. (Pr 5:8)*

Our relationships are very important to God. Apart from our decision to follow Christ, the decisions we make in who to go out with, date, and marry are the most important decisions we make. They have a profound effect on the rest of our lives. That's why God's instruction in the area of relationships is very clear. If you are single, it is God's will that you date a Christian, and that you do not even consider dating a non-Christian. It doesn't matter if you think there is a famine of eligible young men / women in the kingdom, you must never go wandering into Moab looking for a date! If you are dating or engaged, God's will is that you remain pure, abstaining from sexual activity until marriage. If you are married, God's will is that you honour your covenant with your spouse until death, remaining faithful and forsaking all others.

We need to remember that we have an enemy, and his tactics have not changed. The strategy of Balaam, to cause a people who could not be opposed to destroy themselves by entering into compromising relationships, is the same strategy he uses today to bring down those who are blessed and anointed of God.

*But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. (Eph 5:3)*

## **1.6 The Danger of Disillusionment**

Another source of danger to a man or woman of God, is disillusionment in the promises of God. If not dealt with properly, this can cause people to leave the place of faith and begin a jaded journey into the compromise of Moab.

We have already suggested that this was the case for Elimelech. Another clue is the name he gave to his sons. Although he himself had a great name, Elimelech means "God is King," he named his two sons Mahlon, meaning "sickly", and Kilion, meaning "pining". Imagine calling your children sickly and pining! The names we give our children are very important. It is the first thing we give to our children, and it stays with them their whole life. In Bible times it was common practice to name a child after the way one was feeling at the time they were born. Hence Judah, meaning Praise, or Jabez meaning pain! So Elimelech's own name indicates again that he came from a good place, he was given a good name, there was a heritage of faith. Yet he called his own children *Sickly* and *Pining*, speaking of troubled health and frustrated desire. Both of which if not handled correctly can take a person out of the place of faith and into Moab.

How do we stay in the place of faith in the face of frustrated desires? How do we maintain

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our position of trust in God when the fulfilment of the promise that we are seeking him for seems far off? Well, it is in these situations that the basis and foundation of our faith is tested. If our faith is just in the promises of God, what will happen to that faith when the promises tarry? But if our faith is rooted into God himself, his unchangeable nature, everlasting love, eternal faithfulness, then we have found the rock that cannot be shaken. It's good for us to have faith in the promises of God, but it's vital that we have faith in the God of the promises.

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. (Heb 10:23)*

This is the example of Abraham, our father in the faith. He had both troubled health, (he considered his body as good as dead,) and frustrated desire, (Sarah his wife could not have children.) Yet he handled both of these pressures correctly and did not allow them to erode his faith.

*He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Ro 4:19-21)*

Abraham was able to remain in a place of faith, because his faith was not just resting on the promises themselves, but on the faithfulness of the one who made the promises. It's not enough for us just to have faith, and abstract faith that is not rooted is no good at all, the only kind of faith that counts is faith in God himself. Abraham's relationship with God was such that he knew beyond any doubt that God was true to his word. This is how our faith grows. The more we spend time with God, the more we consider his nature, the more we take our eyes off our own situations and lift them up to the one who made the heavens and the earth and sustains all things, the more our faith will grow. It is as we consider God himself and root our faith into his eternal character and nature of goodness, faithfulness and truth that we will be able to hold out in hope for all that he has promised us without giving in to disillusionment.

*By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father **because he considered him** faithful who had made the promise. (Heb 11:11)*

That Abraham's faith was in God rather than just his promises was tested again, when he was asked to sacrifice that precious promise, Isaac. If his faith and hope had been anchored solely in the promise, he would not have been able to do it. Yet because his faith and confidence were in God and he was so sure of his faithfulness he was able to do it, knowing that even if the promise died, God was able to raise it back from the dead.

As such, Abraham is a great example to us, and a stark contrast to Elimelech. He shows us that it is possible, despite the circumstances, even when it looks like the promises we seek are far off, or if it looks like what we have hoped for is going to be taken away, we can still remain in a place of faith and hold on in hope, knowing that God will see us through it all.

This is the kind of faith Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo had. They believed and hoped that God would rescue them from going into the fiery furnace, but their faith was not anchored in that deliverance alone, so they could say with boldness, even in what looked like the face of certain death, that even if God did not deliver them, they would not waver in their faith and obedience. It is such unconditional faith in God himself that enabled Habakkuk the prophet to sing:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17-19)*

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The danger of disillusionment is that it tries to get us to shift from our position of faith before we have received the fulfilment of the promises of God in our lives. Promises that we will certainly receive **IF** we do not give up or move from the position of faith where we can receive.

*I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! (Ps 17:13)*

*Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass. (Jos 21:45)*

*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season **we will reap, if we do not give up.** (Gal 6:9)*

## **1.7 Coming out of Moab**

The good news is that although this chapter of Ruth begins in the land of Moab, it doesn't stay there. Two women return to the people of God and the land of promise. One who had never been a part of God's plan and people before, and one who was returning to the place from which, for whatever reasons, she had strayed from.

This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In him there is forgiveness for all who repent and turn to him. It's not God's will that anyone should be left in Moab (the place of rebellion, sin, compromise, doubt, frustration and unbelief) but he wants all to come or to return to his good plan and purpose for their lives amongst the people of God in a place of faith and trust in him.

For Ruth it was a decision to trust in God for the first time. Turning away from Moab, which up until that time was all that she had known, and giving it all up to follow the God she had heard about through Naomi. This is how we all came to faith in Jesus. Someone told us about him and what he did on the cross on our behalf. Dying in our place to take away our sins and give us a fresh start before God, and rising again in power to give us a new life. We all like Ruth and Orpah, had to make a decision in order to receive the gift he offered. Whether to stay in the place we knew and were familiar with, even though it was a bad place, or to give it all up to follow him. If you have never made such a decision then God has brought you to such a place today. Will you be like Orpah and go back to your old ways, or will you be like Ruth and trust God enough to give over control of your life to him and follow him into all the good plans he has for you?

For Naomi it was a decision to trust God again and return back to him and his people. She, like the prodigal son in the parable, came to her senses and realised the place where she was was not good, and that being amongst the people of God in his purposes was much better. And even though she still had a way to go with her confession of what God is like and her faith in him, she made a good decision and came back to the place of faith.

God doesn't want to leave you in Moab in any area of your life. It doesn't matter how many times it has happened or how long it has been going on for; Naomi was in Moab for ten years! As soon as we make the decision to turn back to God, in repentance and faith, he rushes to meet us with open arms.

You see, nothing of Moab has any place in the presence of God. No Moabite was allowed to enter the presence of God, even up to the tenth generation. How then could Ruth, a Moabite, find a place in God's presence? The answer is that as soon as she turned to God in repentance and faith she ceased to be a Moabite. Rather than being excluded from God's promise, she was now included, for the widows and the foreigners were the very ones that the law of God commanded should be looked after with special care. How wonderful, that in

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all Christ has done for us, he not only takes us out of Moab - he takes Moab out of us! We are no longer of the old man of death - Adam - but are new creations, joined with the man of life - Christ. He takes us from a place where we have no right or inheritance in any of the plans or promises of God and brings us near and gives us a special invitation to enjoy them all.

*Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:12-13)*

It may seem odd to start off with such an emphasis on Moab and all the negative connotations that it holds. But repentance and faith are absolutely vital foundations for every work of God in our lives. Without these foundations whatever is build will not stand, and God is looking to build something of lasting eternal value in our lives. He is taking us out of Moab, and Moab out of us, because he has a great plan that he wants us to be a part of... *a harvest awaits.*