

The Story of Ruth

***“Whatsoever things
were written
aforetime were
written for our
learning, that we
through patience
and comfort of the
scriptures might
have hope.”
—Romans 15:4***

THE STORY OF RUTH IS

set during the time of the judges, before there were any kings in Israel except Jehovah their God. This period of their history lasted several hundred years. At the particular time in which our lesson begins, “there was a famine in the land.” (Ruth

1:1) God’s covenant with Israel was that if they obeyed he would bless them in basket and store, in rain and bountiful crops, and in freedom from their enemies. If they disobeyed, however, lack of rain and famine would be their portion, and they would become slaves to their enemies. (Deut. 28) Thus, this famine was a chastisement, and was evidently severe enough that it reached even the normally well-watered region around Bethlehem, also known in ancient times as Ephrata. Fittingly, the names Bethlehem and Ephrata mean “house of bread” and “fruitfulness.”

Due to the famine, an Israelite named Elimelech made the decision to take his wife, whose name was Naomi, and their two sons, to sojourn in the

neighboring land of Moab. The sons' names were Mahlon and Chilion. God did not bless this move to Moab, and not long after he and his family arrived there, Elimelech died, leaving his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. (Ruth 1:1-3) Mahlon and Chilion stayed in Moab with their mother. However, in violation of their covenant Law, they married heathen wives—"women of Moab"—named Orpah and Ruth. After only a few years, both sons also died. Naomi was now left in a foreign land, and had lost both her husband and two sons. Her once-promising life had turned to sorrow and bereavement—vss. 4,5

DEEP LOVE SHOWN

Naomi had most likely never been fully in sympathy with their move to Moab. When she heard that God had visited his people and the famine was ended, she turned her face and heart back toward Israel. (vs. 6) Naomi felt that her two daughters-in-law would be sacrificing too much to leave their kindred and friends to go with her to a strange land, sharing her poverty, so she urged them to return to their mother's house. She added, "The LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have . . . with me. The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband." (vss. 8,9) However, Orpah and Ruth wept and told Naomi that they would go with her back to Israel and share whatever lot came her way. They answered, "Surely we will return with thee to thy people." (vs. 10) This was indeed a scene of deep love and tenderness.

During their few years of married life, Orpah and Ruth had entered an Israelitish family, and no doubt benefited from a godly and wholesome

atmosphere. Marriage and home life are an important mirror of religion and worship. Israel had distinguished itself, not merely by the name of its God, but by its life in the home, and by faithfulness, love, and respect for spouse, children, and parents. These two young women were evidently gratefully attracted to the home life of Israel. They not only had heard the religion of Israel confessed in the land of Moab, but they also had seen it lived at home, and they returned the kind and tender treatment they had received from Naomi with deep, sacrificing love toward her.

Naomi knew that Orpah and Ruth could not hope for a husband or home in Israel, for what her sons had done in marrying foreign wives was against Jewish Law and customs. In Moab, no doubt, the young widows would marry again, and each of them would find protection, safety, and honor in the home of her new husband. They would also be able to raise a family of their own. In this regard, Naomi reminded them that, although the three of them shared much love together, there was little possibility, or practicality, of their waiting for her to have more sons, who they might marry many years in the future when they became grown.—vss. 11-13

DIFFERENT DECISIONS MADE

Though she had deep love for Naomi, Orpah's natural desire for a home was stronger, and she saw there was no hope of a husband or home in Israel. She counted the cost and felt it was too much. "Orpah kissed her mother in law," bidding her farewell. (vs. 14) We wonder if in later years she thought of Ruth and Naomi, or if she heard of God's rich

blessings toward Ruth. Orpah's decision mirrors many in the Gospel Age who delight in the Gospel message. They love righteousness, but count the cost of becoming one of God's people, by consecration, too much.

Ruth's love was deeper. Naomi had made Israel and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lovely in her eyes. Ruth, in turn, had perhaps begun to claim the same promises which her mother-in-law had no doubt told her about. She wished to go and live with a people who were as amiable and loving as Naomi and her family. Her God, Ruth must have felt, must be a wonderful God!

Ruth's answer to Naomi is one of the most beautiful expressions of self-sacrificing love found in any literary work: "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me." (Ruth 1:16,17) When Naomi saw that Ruth was steadfastly minded to go with her, she protested no more. Ruth had made her decision; she was no longer a Moabite, but an Israelite, at heart.

Here is a deep lesson for us. Those who follow Jesus, giving up all their earthly prospects, are very much like Ruth. Such is consecration. To these, however, God is better even than he was to Ruth, to an extent far beyond what we can fully know. It is to these that he says, "Hearken, O daughter, . . . and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy Father's house; So shall the king greatly

desire thy beauty: for he is thy Lord; and worship thou him.”—Ps. 45:10,11

RETURN TO BETHLEHEM

“So they two went until they came to Bethlehem.” (Ruth 1:19) Naomi’s desire was to be back in her homeland, and she must have rejoiced to have Ruth with her. However, it was, in many ways, a bitter-sweet homecoming. She no longer had a home or friends, only poverty. She had lost her entire family, except for this one daughter-in-law, who was a jewel. Although Naomi’s resources were exhausted, God’s patience and loving-kindness were not. He had already begun to order and arrange for her eventual blessing, because of the faith she had demonstrated by returning to Israel.

The town was stirred at her coming, and they asked, “Is this Naomi?” She answered that they should not call her Naomi, which means “pleasant,” but rather, they should call her Mara, which means “bitterness,” because God had dealt very bitterly with her. (vss. 19,20) She did not, however, try to shift the blame to someone else, but accepted the weight of it herself, saying, “I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty.” (vs. 21) Indeed, it was God who brought her back, even though she did not know the extent to which he was watching over her and Ruth, her only remaining family.

Likewise with us, God’s love is too deep to let us go astray without providing many experiences, warnings and trials, all of which are intended to return us to the right path. God said concerning his people, “I drew them with cords of a man, with

bands of love.” (Hos. 11:4) In his love, God used difficult experiences to bring Naomi back to him. He often does the same with the members of his church—his divine family—whom he greatly loves.

TIME OF BARLEY HARVEST

Naomi and Ruth’s arrival in Bethlehem was at “the beginning of barley harvest.” (Ruth 1:22) The townspeople apparently did not provide them help, perhaps being consumed with their own labors relating to the barley harvest. Ruth, industrious and desiring to help provide for her and Naomi’s needs, volunteered to glean what she could of the barley grain which remained in the corners of nearby fields, where permitted to do so by the owner. (Ruth 2:2) This was no easy task. It would be hard work, with likely meager results. Possibly she would be treated as a beggar, harshly spoken to, if not actually maltreated by rude reapers or hostile owners. She would have to pass the day in the heat and in distress so that, at eventide, weary and hungry, she might bring home a little barley. Ruth’s love for Naomi, however, gave her courage and strength to make light of this. She did not bemoan her lot, but with a willing heart did what she could with what she had.

God had made laws in Israel to provide for the poor and the stranger, because the Israelites had once been strangers in the land of Egypt. One of these laws was that the corners of the fields were not to be reaped, but to be left for the poor and the stranger to glean, that they might have grain. (Lev. 19:9,10; 23:22) Under this arrangement, Ruth had gone forth into the fields, and God directed her

steps. She happened to come to “a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech,” her father-in-law who had died. Not knowing Boaz, Ruth was unaware of this family connection.—Ruth 2:1,3

While she was gleaning, Boaz came from Bethlehem to look over the harvest field. His greeting to the workers showed a virtuous, godlike character. He said to the laborers, “The LORD be with you,” and they answered, “The LORD bless thee.” (vs. 4) This was not merely a polite greeting, but a sincere wish, as shown by Boaz’ ensuing talk with his servant who was supervising the reapers, and who displayed the same spirit as his master. As Boaz watched the workers, he noticed that one woman who was gleaning in the field looked to be especially hard-working. He asked his servant, “Whose damsel is this?”—vs. 5

Like his master, the overseer made it a point to know his workers, even the poor and needy who gleaned the corners of the fields. He told Boaz that the woman he noticed in the field was “the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi,” and that “from morning until now” she had not ceased to glean, resting very little. This praise induced Boaz to speak to Ruth. He asked her to continue gleaning in his field, where he knew she would be safe, because his reapers had been clearly taught proper moral behavior toward those with whom they might come in contact while working. (vss. 6-9) In deep humility, Ruth asked, “Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldst take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?”—vs. 10

BOAZ' RIGHTEOUSNESS AND BENEVOLENCE

Note the righteous and benevolent behavior of Boaz. He did not take advantage of his position to interfere in any way with Ruth's right to glean, nor to wound her self-respect by too much liberality. He was careful in his kindness to respect her, even though she was a stranger. In benevolence, Boaz instructed his reapers to allow her to glean even among the grain which had already been cut and stacked. He even told them to quietly drop a handful now and then so her gleaning would be more fruitful.—Ruth 2:15,16

At the noon hour, Boaz invited Ruth to eat bread with the reapers, and even passed her bits of parched corn, and “she did eat, and was sufficed.” (vs. 14) He also told her he had heard of how much she had done to help Naomi—how she had left her father and mother, and her native land to come to live among a strange people. His next statement was most beautiful. Rather than promising help, he said, “The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.” (vs. 12) Boaz realized that Ruth's sacrifice was too noble and costly to expect any human to give it full value. Only God could reach more deeply into the heart and life of such a one to give a complete recompense. Boaz wished that a full reward be given Ruth, for she had come to seek shelter and trust under the protective power of a covenant-keeping God, amid his covenanted people.

These words of Boaz were perhaps the first sunbeams that had broken through the grief and tears of many weeks. Ruth had lived with the sense of

loss of family and home and people. Now she was told about the God of Israel and his grace by an Israelite other than Naomi, and heard the voice of blessing from another of God's people. Truly, she doubtless thought, this must be a great God and a great people. In gratitude, she said, "Let me find favour in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid."—vs 13

RUTH'S UPRIGHTNESS

Ruth's demeanor, shown by her words and actions, demonstrated an upright character, raising her still higher in the esteem of Boaz. Many people in her place would have said that they were not accustomed to such labor, and begin complaining. Ruth was unassuming, and not looking for favors from others. She had youthful energy, and delighted to do what she could for herself and Naomi. Boaz showed her kindness, not out of pity, but because of her excellence.

Ruth went back to gleaning. She did not slack her hand, nor assume to be helped, because the master had favored her. She worked diligently until evening, and even stayed over to thresh the grain. Ruth had gleaned about an ephah of barley, which is about five gallons, dry measure. She even took home to Naomi some of the food she had saved from lunch. (vss. 17,18) Naomi realized that God's hand must be in all this, and that he had guided Ruth to the field of Boaz and taken care of her. Naomi said, "Blessed be he of the LORD, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead." (vs. 20) She advised Ruth to abide in the field of Boaz throughout the harvest, telling her, "It is good, my

daughter, that thou go out with his maidens, that they meet thee not in any other field.” Obediently, Ruth “kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest.”—Ruth 2:22,23

PRESERVING THE FAMILY LINE

When the harvest was over, Naomi said to Ruth, “Shall I not seek rest for thee?” (Ruth 3:1) The word “rest” as used here means “a settled spot” or home. What Naomi spoke of was in accord with a provision of the Mosaic Law. If a husband died without children, the nearest male relative would marry his widow. (Deut. 25:5-10) Such an arrangement would provide a continuation of the family line of the husband who had died, and ensure a home and family environment for the widow. This was of particular importance in Israel, in order to preserve their national lineage. A related provision of the Law afforded a means by which property of the deceased could be purchased or “redeemed,” so that it might remain in the family’s possession. (see Lev. 25:24-27) Only a blood relative, or “kinsman,” could redeem anything for a family under this arrangement.

These details point forward to the doctrinal truth that Jesus had to become a human being in the full sense of the word. Indeed, as a human embryo he was nourished in the womb of Mary, and he was born and brought up as other children and young people, and grew to manhood. He was of the lineage of Adam and, in addition, was perfect, as Adam was before he fell into sin. As a “kinsman” of Adam, therefore, Jesus was fully qualified under God’s law to redeem the human race. How wonderfully

God thus opens up to us more clearly the depths of his purposes, and by the study of the Old Testament increases our understanding of the New Testament.

Naomi instructed Ruth to go by night to Boaz after he retired and was asleep. She was to gently clear a place at his feet, and draw over herself a corner of the covering without waking him. (Ruth 3:3,4) Ruth followed these instructions, but as she lay next to Boaz, he awoke and asked, "Who art thou?" She answered, "I am Ruth, thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman." (vs. 9) In the Hebrew text, the phrase "thy skirt" means "thy wings," signifying protection, as symbolized by his covering being spread over her. It is the same Hebrew word as used by the psalmist, when speaking of God, he says, "Under his wings shalt thou trust." (Ps. 91:4) By Ruth's actions, she was appealing to Boaz to follow the provisions made in the Law which addressed those matters pertaining to her widowhood.

ALL THREE OF NOBLE CHARACTER

Here again, the nobility of Boaz shines out. He was a man of virtue and honor, an Israelite indeed, before men and before God. He said to Ruth, "Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich." (Ruth 3:10) In this statement, Boaz spoke of the fact that Ruth had shown more kindness toward Naomi by the action just taken, than at the beginning when she engaged in gleaning work. Indeed, this was a harder thing for Ruth to do than glean, for it was more delicate

and sensitive. To claim this right, even though proper under the Law, would expose her to possible misunderstanding. Yet, her deep love for Naomi and selfless mindset surrounded her action with a glow of purity.

To procure honor and love in Israel for her mother-in-law, and to save the name of her dead husband from extinction in Israel, Ruth did what only a chaste, virtuous woman, inspired by the obedience of love, would dare to do, and what polluted minds of the impure can never understand. Only the most noble minded would be willing to risk the world's approval and expose herself to the possibility of appearing as a sinner, in order to do what was right under the Law for her deceased husband and her mother-in-law. Naomi, too, exhibited these same noble qualities, trusting God implicitly, in advising Ruth as she did.

Boaz' response to Ruth was that, although he was a near kinsman to her, "there is a kinsman nearer than I." (Ruth 3:12) He promised her, however, saying that if the nearer kinsman would not do his part, "then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee." (vs. 13) She continued to lay at his feet until morning. Before she left to return to Naomi, Boaz filled her cloak with six measures of barley. The fact that it was six measures might have provided a hint to Naomi that, in any event, Ruth would obtain a resting place, or home, by means of a near kinsman. (vss. 14-18) Six can be thought of as a symbol of labor and service, followed by seven, a time of rest. Men were to work six days, and rest on the seventh. (Exod. 20:8-11) Thus Boaz was indirectly sending Naomi a message that their period of difficult labor was past, and a time of rest was near at hand.

NEARER KINSMAN REFUSES

That morning, Boaz gathered ten men of the elders of the city to act as witnesses and judges of the proceedings which were about to take place. When the nearer relative approached, Boaz laid the matter before him. At first the nearer kinsman said he would redeem the land for Naomi. However, when Boaz called his attention to the Law—that he must also marry Ruth, “to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance”—he said he could not do so, for fear of damaging his own inheritance. (Ruth 4:1-6) Evidently the nearer relative feared to marry Ruth, because she was a Moabitess, and knowing what had happened to Mahlon and Chilion. Ruth, however, had become an Israelite in faith and had left behind Moab, and had joined the covenant people of God.

Boaz knew this, but did not press the matter. The other relative took off his shoe and gave it to Boaz. (vss. 7,8) In Scripture, the shoe, or sandal, is sometimes a symbol of motion and wandering, but also of rest and possession. For example, in Deuteronomy 11:24, the reference evidently is to possession—as something one could tread on as the rightful owner. Thus, when this relative handed over his shoe to Boaz, it symbolized that he thus surrendered to Boaz all rights and claims to possession. Had he done his part, he would have set his shoe on Naomi’s inheritance and thus claimed it as redeemed. Ruth was the heiress of Mahlon, and must go with the possession.

Boaz was now free to redeem the land, being the next nearest kinsman, and to marry Ruth. (vss. 9-12) Note the beautiful words with which the narrative

concludes: “So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bare a son. And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel. And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him.”—Ruth 4:13-15

PICTURE OF REDEMPTION IN CHRIST

The procedure of redemption found in the story of Ruth illustrates the work that Jesus performed in redeeming Adam’s race. As there was no other redeemer, God furnished one in the person of his beloved Son. (Isa. 63:5; John 3:16) In this arrangement, Jesus was to be blood-related to Adam—a human being. He was the “seed” of the woman who would redeem mankind and bruise the serpent’s head. (Gen. 3:15) The life spark of our Lord Jesus was transferred by divine power into the womb of Mary, in the form of a conceived human embryo. In due time Jesus was born as a healthy, perfect human baby. He did not inherit the death sentence, because God was his father, not Joseph. (Luke 1:35; Gal. 4:4) When Jesus was of full age according to the Jewish Law—thirty years old—he offered himself as a ransom for all, and carried out that work with his death on the cross. (Luke 3:21-23; I Tim. 2:5,6; John 19:30) With this ransom price he bought back—redeemed—Adam and all his children, as well as Adam’s inheritance, the earth.—I Cor. 15:21,22; Rom. 3:23-25; Isa. 66:22; II Pet. 3:13

Jesus will also marry a bride—one who was a “daughter” of Adam. This contract is witnessed and testified to by the elders, the ancient fathers and prophets. Jesus planted his “shoe” upon the inheritance. As the Redeemer, he walked up and down over the possession for three and one-half years. Our Lord and his bride, as spirit beings in the resurrection, will not need the earthly inheritance, so it will be returned to the children of Adam.

Ruth pictures this bride, those who come into the family of God by a full consecration of their all, leaving behind all earthly hopes, aims and ambitions. These are taken into the family of God, and if faithful, become the bride of Christ, and receive a heavenly inheritance. Ruth gave up her home, and God gave her a far richer one. She gave up a husband and children, and God gave her a prince in Israel, and made her the mother of kings, for she was the ancestor of David and of Jesus, the “King of kings.” She gave up her people, and God gave her a place among his covenant people. Finally, she gave up her native land and country, and God gave her the inheritance of Naomi, and a share with Boaz in his rich estate. Thus, God also deals with his church. With Paul, we can say, “He which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also, . . . and shall present us with you. . . . For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”—II Cor. 4:14-17 ■