

Once Upon a Time

Ruth – Part I

Introduction to Ruth

Introduction

A Christian magazine to which I subscribe carried a number of humorous and very real illustrations on the subject of love and romance.

This is a poem the article carried. Let us see how many men relate to it!

Roses are red,

Violets are blue,

Daffodils cost thirty bucks,

Will dandelions do?

Ladies, maybe this is the reason you can identify with a single woman who had been dating a guy for several years. She had tried everything – and nothing worked – but she just could not get him to commit. So, she placed an ad in the classifieds, listing her phone number underneath the ad, which simply read, “Husband wanted.” The next day, she received over a hundred phone calls from women, and they all said the same thing, “You can have mine.”

So, what do kids think about love?

Two kids responded to the question, “How does true love happen?” with the following insight:

- Nine-year-old Roger, the little philosopher, gave his opinion on love when he said, “Falling in love is like an avalanche and you gotta run for your life.”
- Nine-year-old Janet replied, “No one is sure why love happens, but I heard it has something to do with how you smell.”

I will never forget a conversation with my youngest daughter when she was around eleven or twelve years old. We were riding in my truck one day and I asked her if she had ever been kissed.

She said, “No sir.” And she was dead serious.

I said, “Honey, that’s amazing, that’s great.”

Then she added, “But once after Sunday school a couple of weeks ago, a boy tried to kiss me.”

I said, “He did?”

I held my tongue, but my initial thought was, “I wanna know who that kid is – there are things worse than church discipline!” Instead, I asked her, “Well, what did you do?”

She said, “I punched him in the stomach.”

I said, “Right there in the classroom?”

She said, “Yes, sir.”

“You punched him in the stomach?”

“Yes, sir”

I said, “That’s terrific, way to go!”

This redefines the right hand of fellowship!

Well, if you are a father of girls, like me, you have probably spent many hours reading fairytales to them. I remember my daughters sitting on my lap as I read a classic fairytale to them.

They loved hearing the enchanted stories of *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Though they heard the same stories over and over again, their excitement never faded when Prince Charming finally appeared.

Now we all probably enjoy fairytales, but we know they do not really come true, do we not?

However, one tale did come true. And it has all the elements of an instant classic – a depressed and angry stepmother, a beautiful but poor damsel in distress, and a wealthy prince to save the day.

J. Vernon McGee wrote, “This reads like a novel, but it is not fiction.”ⁱ

This tale is for real. There is no evidence in this love story of a poisonous apple, a wicked witch, or a glass slipper. All of that stuff is make-believe.

This is for real. There will be plenty of evidence that God’s hand is at work behind the scenes, arranging all the details so that the damsel in distress would be rescued at just the right time, in just the right way, by just the right man.

This powerful little book that tells this tale is only four chapters long and can easily be read in less than thirty minutes.

There are some who believe this little book was written by an anonymous author and others who find good reason to believe it was written by the prophet Samuel.ⁱⁱ

We cannot know for sure, but Jewish tradition dating back centuries considers Samuel to be the author of this little love story.

There are six action-packed, emotion-filled scenes in this dramatic tale of true love.

In fact, just the opening few words of verse 1, “*Now it came about in the days when...*” sound a lot like, “Once upon a time, long, long ago,” does it not?

Before we turn too many pages, let me give several reasons why God preserved this twenty-minute love story in our Bibles. Each of these will deepen our appreciation of the truths embedded in the book of Ruth.

The Book of Ruth – Why Did God Preserve It?

1. One of the first reasons the book of Ruth is provided by God in His word is to demonstrate the gospel of grace.

You might miss the richness of this truth as you read the story.

In the Hebrew culture, Ruth was one of five scrolls that would be read annually at a festival. Among the other scrolls that were read annually were Esther, at the Feast of Purim, Ecclesiastes, at the Feast of Tabernacles, and then, Ruth would be read at the Feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is more than coincidence that the love story of a kinsman redeemer who would win his bride would be

read at the Feast of Pentecost – and centuries later, on the day of Pentecost, *the* Kinsman Redeemer would initiate the redeeming of His bride as the bride of Christ, and the church is created on this day. It is the work of grace then and now.

In this story, there is a Gentile girl, a descendant of Moab, condemned by the law, forbidden to worship in the temple of God under the law which declared,

No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord . . . (Deuteronomy 23:3)

Yet, this girl gives herself to Boaz, asking him to redeem her, which has a fascinating parallel to our own salvation. He redeemed her, not because she met the requirements of the law, but because of his grace – she was “saved”.

- The law said, “You can’t”; grace said, “You can.”
- The law said, “Keep out”; grace said, “Welcome in.”

This leads to another reason for preserving this love story. The book of Ruth not only demonstrates the gospel of grace, but something more.

2. A second reason the book of Ruth is preserved by God is to illustrate the love of Christ for His church.

The book of Ruth provides the only detailed example in the Bible of a “Goel” – a kinsman redeemer.

The Law of Moses allowed for a near relative or kinsman to marry the widow of a deceased relative in order to provide everything she needed, including an heir to his estate.

It was not that just any man could marry the widow – he had to be a relative of the family. The closest family member had the right of first refusal, as we will discover later in our study.

Boaz was related to Naomi’s husband and could legally redeem Ruth if he chose to do so. As a result, he becomes an illustration of Jesus Christ and His love for the bride.

In this we discover one of the reasons for the incarnation of God the Son. He became a human being – a relative of the human race – now able to redeem the bride.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Galatians,

*. . . when the fullness of the time came,
God sent forth His Son, made of a woman,
born under the Law,*

*so that He might redeem those who were
under the Law . . .*

(Galatians 4:4-5)

Furthermore, Boaz was not responsible for the bankruptcy of Ruth's estate. Likewise, Jesus Christ was not responsible for the sinful bankruptcy of the human race, yet . . .

*. . . He Himself bore our sins in His body on
the cross, so that we might die to sin and live
to righteousness . . . (I Peter 2:24)*

Consider also the fact that Boaz could have chosen to select a more eligible bride, untouched by sin and uncondemned by the Law of Moses. In the same way, Christ chose to redeem us . . .

*. . . while we were yet sinners . . .
(Romans 5:8)*

Also, just as Boaz had to be wealthy enough to buy the estate of Elimelech, our Lord gave us . . .

*. . . redemption through His blood . . .
according to the riches of His grace
(Ephesians 1:7)*

The legal tender of Boaz was money; the legal tender of Christ was His life's blood.

However, mark in your mind that this transaction was neither cold nor emotionless.

If you have read this love story before, you know the way the tension builds and builds until you find yourself saying to the other potential kinsman redeemer, "Don't buy the land! Don't say, 'Yes!' Boaz loves her." And you can sense that Boaz is about to jump out of his skin when that man says to him, "Tell you what, you can have the land and you can redeem Ruth!"

How absolutely thrilling this is! And you know, as you have been led from one dramatic scene to the next, that at this point, Boaz can hardly contain his joy. This is the joy of a man who has just proposed and she said, "Yes!"

Guys, up to that point in your life, this was the greatest moment of joy you had ever experienced – amen?

Amen! You are such quick learners!

Jesus Christ is not saying, "Okay, I'll take Stephen and Marsha . . . yeah, okay, I'll take Don and Kay . . . yeah, I guess they'll do."

Oh no. The redemption of one sinner is cause for celebration and joy in and among the hosts of heaven (Luke 15:10).

When did election, the awakening of redeemed sinners, and the calling of sinners to join the bridal party become just some cold emotionless transaction with our Savior?

More than likely it comes out of our theological past. Writers like Jonathan Edwards, in the *History of Redemption*, and Stuart Robinson, in *Discourses of Redemption*, entirely omitted any reference to the book of Ruth, even though they were tracing the history of redemption through the Old Testament. They got the concept right, but they missed the passion.

J. Vernon McGee wrote that this method of writing brought redemption to mean a cold business transaction. A thousand times no! Redemption is the love story of a Kinsman who neither counted the cost nor figured up the profit and loss, but for joy paid an exorbitant price for one that He loved.^{iv}

McGee went on to make this comment: "The book of Ruth declares that redemption is not a business transaction but a love [story]."^v

The book of Ruth not only demonstrates the work of grace and the love of Christ, but even more.

3. A third reason the book of Ruth is included by God in His word for us is to defend the lineage of Jesus Christ.

The book of Ruth provides a clear line between David and Judah – the line of the coming King. In fact, the last genealogy between David and Jesus Christ, providing the link between David and ultimately Jesus Christ, is the genealogical table found at the end of Ruth.

Ruth's genealogy will be brought over and used by both Matthew and Luke in their genealogies of Jesus Christ.

So critical is the link that Ruth provides in her genealogical table, that Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitzsch believe it is the primary reason the book of Ruth was recorded.^{vi}

This is believed for good reason – it is the singular book of Ruth that gives Matthew and Luke enough information to prove that Jesus Christ is a descendant of the royal line of David.

Let me make one more comment on this point. We will discover in the genealogical record that Boaz's Gentile mother, Rahab the harlot, did not just marry any Jewish man – she married a man from the line of Judah.

In the same way, Jesus Christ, who married His bride, the church, is not only a member of the ruling line, He is the final High King.

The book of Ruth demonstrates the grace of God; illustrates the love of Christ for His church; defends the lineage of Jesus Christ as a literal descendant of David. We also have another reason for the book.

4. The fourth reason for the preservation of the book of Ruth is that it is proof that godly living can take place in an ungodly culture.

This fairytale that really comes true begins with the word “And” or “Now,” depending on the translation. It is a continuation of the books of the Judges. Ruth 1:1 begins,

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed . . .

What kind of days were they? What was it like to live during the days of the judges?

All we have to do is look across the page at the last verse in the book of Judges, which reads,

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

This immediately informs us that the beautiful love story of Boaz and Ruth will shine against the troubled, sinful, “anything goes,” immoral backdrop of its time.

One author wrote that the book of Ruth is a pearl in the pig pen of the judges.^{vii}

These are the dark days of the judges when everyone did that which was right in their own eyes.

You might come to the conclusion, after reading the book of Ruth, that this was a great time to be a follower of God; that all men were kind to women and women were discreet and respectful toward men. You might get the impression that all landowners cared about their employees and money was used to help the needy.

Nothing could be further from the truth – which makes the pure love story of Boaz and Ruth all the more remarkable.

What were days of the judges like? They included the lowest points in the history of Israel, for starters – division, cruelty, apostasy, civil war, and national disgrace.^{viii}

Now, based on clues we will not go into, Old Testament scholars believe Boaz was a contemporary of Gideon and that they probably knew one another.

However, Gideon’s biography goes from good to bad. He eventually married a number of women, who bore seventy sons that would be assassinated in cold blood as soon as Gideon dies (Judges 8 and 9).

There is the judge named Samson whose life was one fornication after another until he sold his soul to his latest mistress named Delilah. She discovered his secret and cut off his hair one night, and the Philistines captured him and put out his eyes (Judges 16). There goes one of the judges.

Then, there is the unbelievable horror story of the Levite who took a mistress from none other than the town of Bethlehem. He traveled to Ephraim where she was gang raped and killed by Israelites (Judges 19). The story spread throughout the entire Jewish world.

This was front page news in the Bethlehem Times. These were the days of the judges.

There were no easier times to find a spouse, raise a family, and live for God than today. Yet, in the lives of Boaz and Ruth, we see:

- the sanctuary of a godly home;
- the commitment to humble service to those in need;
- the description of godly manhood that shepherds a family;
- the presentation of godly womanhood that pursues a virtuous life;
- the sanctity of the marriage vow;
- the high standards for marriage and fidelity, even in the days of the judges when mistresses were as common as wives.

These were the dark days of the judges – and this is the shining testimony of Boaz and Ruth.

- It is possible to live a godly life in the midst of an ungodly culture.
- It is possible to be pure when surrounded with impurity.
- It is possible to not have a culture rewrite our character – but for our character to influence our culture.

The book of Ruth is a demonstration of the grace of God; an illustration of the love of Christ, the proof of Christ’s lineage; the proof that godliness is possible even in ungodly times, and one more.

5. The fifth reason the book of Ruth is provided by God is to reveal the providence of God in the smallest details of life.

Let me give a quick overview of all the “coincidences” in this book. They include:

- The patriarch of this family, Elimelech, in his faithlessness, left the land of God and the people of God and just happened to go to Moab to live.
- One of Elimelech’s sons, in his rebellion, just happened to marry a Moabite girl named Ruth.
- Ruth just happened to desire to follow after God and return to the land and people of God with Naomi ten years later.
- Ruth just happened to glean in a field which just happened to belong to Boaz who just happened to be a relative of Naomi’s.
- Boaz just happened to be riding his horse to the field on the very day that Ruth just happened to choose his field in which to forage for leftover grain.
- Boaz just happened to be a godly single man, the son of a Gentile woman named Rahab, who just happened to have converted to Judaism years earlier and just happened to marry a Jewish man, so that their son just might happen to be open to the idea of a Gentile wife who had converted like his mother had.
- So, it just happened that Boaz and Ruth married and became part of the lineage of Christ, who would then carry not only Jewish blood, giving Him the right to sit on David’s throne, but Gentile blood as an illustration that the bride He came to win would include both Jewish and Gentile believers.

Is it not amazing the way all this just happened?!

Not quite! This is a book that reveals that God is the Director in the symphony of life and He orchestrates all things to fulfill His purposes. Some of these events make sense to us now, and some will not make sense for generations.

At the outset of this dramatic tale:

- Boaz could be thinking, “Why doesn’t God give me a wife?”
- Naomi will be asking, “God why did You take away my husband?”
- Ruth will be wondering, “What kind of God have I decided to follow? What are His people like?”
- Even Elimelech must have thought, “My faithlessness to follow God during the famine has ruined everything – everything is lost.”

They have no idea. And the truth is, neither do we.

Conclusion

So, as this story line begins, and as the curtain prepares to rise, take heart my friend – God happens to be the One writing your story and mine, for His glory and His purpose.

The best thing to do is follow God’s lead; submit to each stroke of His quill as He crafts a tale that, in the end, will fit within His purpose and for His glory, and give us the greatest satisfaction. Our lives simply become the parchment upon which our sovereign Lord writes His purposes and His plans – His story line for us – His drama. No failure is final; no fear is fatal.

We are His story.

So let us be like the college student I read about several years ago who stood up at the end of a missions conference and held up a blank sheet of paper in front of her peers and said, “This piece of blank paper represents my life, now dedicated to Christ. It symbolizes that I am open to whatever He wants to write into my life . . . I’m willing for anything.” Then she said, “The only thing I’ve done is, at the bottom of the page, signed my name. Everything is yet unknown, but I’ve already signed on . . . my life is His.” May we be like her!

So, our Father begins, “Once upon a time . . .” We know it will end, “And he or she lived happily forever after.” And, by the way, our story will never read, “The end.” because our “happily ever after” will never, ever end.

This is the background to the drama of Ruth and Boaz. The curtain will rise in our next session together.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/9/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ J. Vernon McGee, Ruth: The Romance of Redemption (Thomas Nelson, 1943), p. 14.

ⁱⁱ A. Boyd Luter, God Behind the Seen (Baker Books, 1995), p. 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Shepherd, ed., Shepherds Notes (Broadman & Holman, 1998), p. 3.

^{iv} McGee, p. 17.

^v Ibid., p. 18.

^{vi} C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1991 ed.), p. 494.

^{vii} McGee, p. 20.

^{viii} Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Committed (Victor Books, 1993), p. 14.