

## **Ruth: A Loyal Love Story**

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When I went to Moody Bible Institute in 1982 I was 22 years old and not interested in dating. I just wanted to study the Bible. To be more truthful, I had scoped out all the women on campus and that's why I wasn't interested. When I came back to Moody for my second semester I signed up to take the Book of Romans taught by one of the hardest teachers, Dr. Mayer. He served as a Marine and ran his classroom like we were his recruits in boot camp. I had taken him the previous semester for another class and loved how he taught though I found him to be personally intimidating.

On the first day of class I found my seat and sat at attention. The bell rang and class began. About a minute later, this beautiful blonde came flying into the classroom and sat down right next to me! I had never seen her before and was rejoicing at God's sweet providence. Dr. Mayer told us to sit where we wanted to sit the next day and he would make up a seating chart.

I arrived at class early the next day, making sure there was an empty seat next to me in the hopes that this beautiful babe named Beth would sit right next to me. Just before the bell rang, some dweeb plopped down in the adjacent desk and my plans were dashed. About a minute later, Beth came flying into the room and sat in a completely different row. I should add that she was late because she was brand new to campus and had a hard time finding the room.

I still can't believe I did this but after class I went up to Dr. Mayer with my heart racing and my words tangled and asked him if I could change seats on the seating chart. Since there was an empty chair next to Beth, I asked him if I could move there. He looked at me and winked and said, "*Sure.*" He erased my name from one row and placed me right next to her. Beth never knew what happened. We became good friends and then she ended up chasing me all around campus until I finally agreed to date her! Actually, that's how the story goes in my dreams.

I love telling this because it helps to keep our story of love alive. Today we're going to listen to a loyal love story from the Book of **Ruth**. It's much better than anything you can watch on the Hallmark channel or find in a classroom at Moody!

Many have said that the Book of Ruth is the most beautiful short story ever written. It's an account of anxiety, fear, love, and commitment that inflames the imagination and soothes the soul. It begins with despair and ends with delight.

Many Jewish people still read this book out loud so we're going to do the same as I read large sections of the narrative. There is precedent for the reading of the Bible out loud before a gathering of worshipers. In Nehemiah 8:3, we read that Ezra "... *read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday...*" The Apostle Paul gave this challenge in 1 Thessalonians 5:27, "*I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.*"

Before reading it however, I want to give some background information that will help us understand what's going on. While the Book of Ruth is a scintillating story of love and loyalty, we're separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years from its setting. We'll conclude with some ways to apply these loyal love lessons to our own lives.

### **Background Information**

Please turn to the Book of Ruth. This short book of just four chapters is found between Judges and 1 Samuel.

**1. Timing.** The events take place during the time when the judges ruled in Israel. This was a period in which God's people cycled from disobedience to defeat to deliverance on seven different occasions. Because everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes, sin was rampant and God's people had hardened hearts.

**2. Setting.** We read in verse 1 that because there was a bad famine in Bethlehem, a man took his wife and two sons to live in the country of Moab. The famine was a consequence of the deliberate disobedience of God's people according to Deuteronomy 11:16-17: "*Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit...*"

**3. Moab.** Moab was a land of rich soil and adequate rainfall so this man traveled to a place where his crops wouldn't fail. This family would have journeyed north to Jerusalem and then crossed the Jordan River by Jericho. Depending on where they settled, the trip would have been about one hundred miles and would have taken about a week.

It's important to know that Moab was an enemy of Israel. The Moabites were the descendants of a man named Moab who was the son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and one of his daughters (Genesis 19:30-38). In Numbers 25, we read that the Moabites led Israel into sexual immorality and pagan worship.

Deuteronomy 23:3-4 lays out some pretty strong words: ***“No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation...”***

This man is trying to flee the judgment of God on Israel and is disobeying doubly by going to live among the Moabites. Interestingly, some commentators suggest that Ruth was a member of the 11<sup>th</sup> generation so she would not have been cursed.

**4. Characters.** The Israelite man's name was Elimelech and his wife's name was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. These two sons married Moabite women, one who was named Orpah, and the other Ruth. When we come to chapter two, we're introduced to a man named Boaz, who was a relative of Elimelech. However, the main character in this narrative is God, with His name used 23 times in 85 verses!

**5. Situation.** During their stay in Moab, Naomi's husband died and then about ten years later, both Mahlon and Kilion also die. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are now widows. Widows in the ancient world had no social status and no economic means to survive. This would especially be true for Naomi, since she was an Israelite living in a foreign country – she's been compared to a female Job. There was no Social Security system and she would have had no male protector or provider. Widows would equate to the homeless in our society today.

**6. Gleaning.** God has always made provision for the poor and destitute. Leviticus 19:9-10: ***“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest... You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.”*** This helps explain what Ruth was doing in chapter 2 and it also reveals a little about the character of Boaz as a man who followed the Law and cared for the poor.

**7. Kinsman redeemer.** If a man died and left a widow and no sons, his nearest relative would be given the opportunity to buy his land and marry his widow so that she could have sons to carry on the deceased's name. This relative would be obligated, at his own expense, to buy the property and give it back to the relative who had sold it. If the nearest relative refused, then the next closest kin would take on the role of the redeemer. There was a catch, however. The kinsman-redeemer

couldn't make the decision to redeem on his own. He had to be asked by the widow to be her redeemer. That helps to explain what takes place in chapter 3.

**8. Wings.** Chapter 3 will make you hold your breath and scratch your head. Ruth puts on her *Ruth Lauren* perfume, dresses in her finest clothes and goes to the threshing floor to scope out sweaty Boaz. When Boaz falls asleep, Ruth takes the covers off his feet and lies down. When Boaz wakes up, she says in verse 9: “...*I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.*” This same word is used of God's protection in 2:12, when Boaz says to Ruth, “*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*”

In this ceremonial act, Ruth is asking Boaz to shelter her under his wings and to redeem her. To pull a portion of a kinsman's garment over her was the legal way of claiming protection and redemption. In short, she is making a marriage proposal to him!

**9. Town Gate.** In Chapter 4, Boaz goes to the city gates and sits down to conduct business. The gate of a city was like a courthouse, where transactions took place, and where cases were heard. This was also where you would most likely run into someone you knew, kind of like Wal-Mart.

**10. Sandals.** Sandals were the ordinary footwear of the time, but were also symbolic in the relationship between a widow and her legal guardian. The giving of a sandal was like a signed contract, especially in cases where land was in dispute.

Now, with that as background, let's listen to some sections of this loyal love story.

## Reading of Ruth

### Love Lessons

Let's draw out some lessons from this loyal love story.

**1. Surrender to God's Sovereignty.** One of the overriding themes is the providential sovereignty of God. He is seen everywhere, weaving His purposes through events and circumstances. He uses a famine to bring a Jewish man and his family to Moab, where his sons marry Moabite women. Through the unexpected

widowhood of both Naomi and Ruth, they end up in the Promised Land (Wisconsin) because they hear that the famine has ended. Naomi teaches Ruth about the things of God and Ruth makes a life-changing commitment. The book begins with three funerals and ends with a wedding.

Ruth doesn't even know Boaz exists in chapter 1. Then, in 2:3, we read that Ruth "**happened**" to find herself in a field that belonged to Boaz, the most eligible bachelor in Bethlehem! This was no coincidence! God orchestrated the events in order to accomplish His purposes. God's invisible hand steered her to that particular field on that particular day at that exact time.

Do you realize that He's working everything together for your good and His ultimate glory? Have you surrendered yourself to His sovereignty? Do you trust His purposes for your life, even when things look bleak? Have you discovered the glories of "God's happenings" in your life?

**2. Cultivate your character.** Think about Naomi for a moment. She goes to Moab with her husband and sons, leaving her friends and her country behind. She continued to walk with God, even when her two sons married Moabites. She worshiped the true God when the entire culture bowed to Baal. She made the most of her situation by teaching Ruth about a relationship with God. She had the courage to return to her land and then boldly told Ruth to make a marriage proposal to Boaz. She launched her matchmaking plan but she also knew how to be patient and wait on the Lord as she said in 3:18, "***Be patient, my daughter, until we see what happens.***"

Ruth reveals a woman who was extremely loyal and extremely industrious, working hard to gather grain as she looked for food and for favor. Her job was menial and maybe even degrading but she was diligent. 2:23 tells us that she gleaned "***until the end of barley and wheat harvests.***" A slacker she was not. She lived out Proverbs 13:4: "***The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.***"

She was kind and generous, sharing her food with Naomi. She was respectful and yet bold, willing to put some risk into her faith. She also had a great reputation because Boaz knew all about her. We see this in 3:11 where she is referred to as a "***worthy woman,***" which is the same word used of the woman in Proverbs 31.

Boaz was a man of integrity and was greatly respected by everyone. He was known for his kindness and as a boss knew how to treat his employees. Notice

how he greeted the reapers in 2:4: ***“The Lord be with you!”*** They answered, ***“The Lord bless you.”*** He was a God-centered man who lived on mission at work.

He followed the law by making sure the poor were cared for and gave Ruth way more than she even expected. He protected and provided for Ruth, even before they got married and he was a man of purity, even when he had the opportunity to be otherwise. He urged a relative to do what was right even though he wanted Ruth all along.

In the end, each of them was rewarded for cultivating their character. Naomi is now cared for, and is found holding her grandson at the end of the story. Ruth gets married and has a son who will eventually appear in King David’s photo album and is in the family tree of the Messiah. Boaz gets married and has the joy of passing along his faith to future generations.

Are you cultivating your character? Don’t sell out, don’t cave in, and don’t bail on God.

**3. Deal with a drifting heart.** Elimelach’s name meant, *“my God is King,”* but he lived without God as his king. He probably had parents who were believers because they gave him this name but he turned his back on the truth.

He intended to be gone for a little while but ended up staying a long while in a far away place. The word ***“remained”*** means, *“to become.”* He not only went into Moab, Moab got into him! Friends, a drifting heart can lead to disobedient days, which can turn to weeks to months to years to a decade. We allow a little sin in and a little slackness and all of sudden we find ourselves in a foreign land. This shows how deceptive and devastating sin is.

I’m reminded of this quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson: *“Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.”* Ravi Zaharias is fond of saying: *“Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.”*

Some of you have moved to Moab and you might not even know it. The first step is to admit it.

**4. Return to the Lord today.** It’s time to turn from bitterness to blessedness. Admit your hunger and find what you’re looking for in the Bread of Life, born in

Bethlehem, the house of Bread. If God feels far away, you don't have to make your way back to Him with a whole bunch of steps. No, just turn to Him and you're back. In 1:6, we read that Naomi arose ***“to return.”*** In verse 7: ***“So she set out from the place where she was...”***

**5. Receive the Redeemer.** Just as Ruth saw reality in Naomi's faith, and wanted it for herself, some of you are ready to receive the redeemer into your life. Ruth and Orpah help us see the options. They both had the opportunity to turn their backs on what they were worshiping and follow the true God. Orpah started out following Naomi but then bailed. God doesn't want a half-hearted commitment. We read that Ruth ***“clung”*** to Naomi – that has the idea of sticking to someone and was used of a man “cleaving” to his wife. We read that she was determined until death in 1:17. He's looking for people today who will say, ***“Your God will be my God.”*** Are you ready to do that?

We all need a redeemer. Boaz did all the work to make redemption happen while Ruth requested and received what had been accomplished on her behalf. The Bible says that we need someone to rescue us from the slippery slope of sin. You might think that you can't possibly be forgiven for what you've done. That's not true. God can forgive anyone. He forgave a Moabite and He can give you a fresh start as well. And, just as Ruth needed to ask for redemption, so too, you need to ask Jesus to redeem you.

In the Old Testament, a redeemer must be related by blood, he must be able to redeem, and he must be willing. Jesus took on flesh and blood so that He could relate to us. He is able to redeem because He has paid the price for our redemption and He is more than willing. Are you willing to receive Him as your redeemer?

The Book of Ruth concludes with a genealogy. When we come to Matthew 1, we see that the lineage of Boaz and Ruth from Bethlehem ended up in David's greater Son, born of a virgin in a stable in Bethlehem so you can be born again.

Notice in 4:11 that after Ruth is redeemed, she is no longer called ***“the Moabite,”*** but is now referred to as ***“woman”*** and she is compared to Leah and Rachel, who gave birth to the twelve sons of Jacob. Likewise, when we are saved we are transformed from “slave and sinner” to “sanctified saint.”

Now that's quite a love story!

**No Longer Slaves**

## **New Members**