

*The Book of Ruth***A Light Shining In A Dark Place**

by Steve Zeisler

Illness destroys your appetite for health. When you're socked in with the flu, the easiest thing to do is pull the covers over your head, draw the curtains, and stay in a darkened room, avoiding the sunlight and fresh air that might actually encourage health to return sooner. The congestion that comes with a cold not only makes it difficult to breathe, but it cancels the mechanism of taste so that you can't tell fresh apple pie from stale oatmeal. Illness not only is hard in itself, but it steers us, away from the good choices that might bring us back to wholeness sooner.

Moral illness is the same. When the inner person is languishing, we are less hungry for wholeness, more resistant to the good choices that will bring us near to God. Frequently, well-meaning friends give good advice, but because we have no appetite for spiritual health and no hope that we'll ever get well, the advice doesn't help. What we need when our souls are sick are good stories, and that's why the Bible is so filled with them. We need the incarnation of truth, stories of how God stirred in someone's experience, bringing life and hope. When we hear the stories, our hunger is quickened: "I want that myself. Maybe there's hope for me."

We're going to consider the book of Ruth as a whole in this message. I urge you to read this book several times before you pick up the next message. Read it imaginatively, putting yourself in the place, smelling the aromas, feeling the textures observing the people, taking in the sights.

Although it is three thousand years old, this is as contemporary a story as you can find. The tensions between the people in the story are exactly the same as we experience in our relationships. The shattered dreams, the rebuilding of hope, the communication between men and women, the fears, the possibilities, the prayers, the work, and the frustration are all familiar in our day. It deals with the essentials of how we're made, which don't change and which don't apply to only one culture.

Consider modern advice on romance, relationships, and sexuality. "Three easy steps to heart language," for example, or "capturing the right person." Most of the advice is faddish and unwise. A story that can tell the truth century after century is worth learning from.

The book of Ruth has always been regarded as a great work of literature, even by people who don't think the Bible is divinely inspired in any sense. It begins with famine and death and ends with harvest and birth. It's therefore a redemption story. All of us need a redeemer and the transforming love of God.

FOUR CHARACTERS AND FOUR SCENES

There are four characters in this story. Ruth the Moabite woman and Boaz the Jewish man who love each other. Their romantic exchanges, the tension of their relationship, the resolution of that tension, their marriage, and birth of their child comprise the plot. Another character, equally significant, is Naomi, the mother of Ruth's first husband (who died in Moab). She serves as a counterpoint to the other two. It is Naomi's grumbling, questioning, frustration, struggle to trust God, that throw into bold relief the power and beauty of faith and godliness that Boaz and Ruth have.

A fourth character is less obvious: the townspeople as a collective. This story takes place in Bethlehem, the city where Jesus would later be born. The child born to Ruth and Boaz is the ancestor of David the king and the ancestor of Jesus. The women of Bethlehem mentioned at the end of chapter 1, the men at the beginning of chapter 4, and the women again at the end of chapter 4 form a kind of chorus. They observe what takes place, and eventually they are gathered in. As God teaches Ruth and Boaz to love each other and live lives

Four scenes make up the story, one in each of the four chapters. In the first scene a father and two sons sojourn in Moab in famine conditions. All three men die, and their wives are left alone. Two of the women, Naomi and one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, decide to return to Bethlehem.

The second scene takes place in a field at harvest. It is a scene filled with enough detail for us to use our imaginations to picture people and events. There's a remarkable exchange when Boaz and Ruth meet for the first time, and a love relationship begins.

The third scene takes place at night after a harvest celebration. Ruth and Boaz, with whom we have fallen in love ourselves by this point, are lying together whispering under the stars. There is unmistakable sexual tension in this scene.

The fourth scene takes place in the public square the next day, when Boaz declares his intention to marry Ruth. He faces a man who had prior responsibility from God to care for her and Naomi. He gives that man the challenge to do so, and because the man chooses not to, Boaz and Ruth are able to marry.

Each of these scenes has an important conversation in it. We can learn as much about communication from this book as from anything else. How can people talk to one another from the heart? How do you connect with someone by opening up and being honest about what's on the inside?

When you consider the contemporary love stories, the instruction our culture gives about what it means to be a friend or to be in love, what it means to tell the truth, there's very little comparison to the depth here. There is more insight about communication, commitment, romance, honor, and having a servant's heart in this three-thousand-year-old story than in almost any of its modern counterparts.

PEOPLE LIKE US IN A DIFFERENT PLACE AND TIME

Let me describe some of the things that make this story difficult so they won't hinder your reading. The very first sentence of the book says, "Now in the days when the judges governed, there was a famine in the land." The book of Judges, immediately preceding this one, tells us of those days. They are among the bleakest, most cruel, darkest spiritually in all of Israel's history. The period of the judges is characterized in the last sentence of the book: "...Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Each person named himself God. Each person said, "My analysis is superior to all others. My passion must be exercised in the name of freedom. My needs require that they be met." Each person had as the measure of all things himself or herself alone. That should be familiar to us. We live in an age in which there is little inclination on the part of our contemporaries to do anything except demand their rights, and insist on having their way.

There are three customs in this story that are unfamiliar to us, not being part of our culture. We will encounter the word "gleaning" in chapter 2. Gleaning was God's provision for the poor in Israel. The role of the *levir*, marriage to a childless widow, shows up as a theme in this story. The role of the *goel*, the kinsman redeemer who buys back for the family what was lost under tragic circumstances, is also a theme in this book.

The role of women in that age was much different than in ours. They did not control their own destiny; they required a man for any kind of security—a father, a husband, a brother, a son, or some other male figure who would care for them and preserve the property.

Lastly, we should note that this was very much a land-based time. The Jews were living in the promised land given them by God, and retaining property in the family was critical to their identity. It was an agricultural time when riches were built entirely on the ability of land to produce wealth.

But once you get past those differences, as I've already mentioned, everything else about this story is exactly like our setting. These people are the same kind of people we are on the inside. Consider what we find by looking at similarities.

First, these are ordinary folk. There is no reference to royalty or genius or riches or beauty, nothing that marks them out and makes them so different that we couldn't imagine ourselves experiencing what they experience. They are like ordinary people today.

Remember the creation account in Genesis, when the Lord said, "It is not good for the man to be alone...." In every age since then, he has been fitting a man and a woman for each other, if they will let him. God has been teaching people lessons, drawing them near and giving them to one another, making marriages, and making families. What he is doing today, he did three thousand years ago in the same way. Boaz was made exactly the right husband for Ruth. And the dynamics of how they were brought together, how they learned to trust God, the listening they had to do, and the words they needed to say are all the same as in the making of marriages, the banishing of aloneness, that God does today.

But this is not just a love story. Most of us, if we marry at all, will marry only one person in a lifetime. But all of us have a capacity for love that is different from sexual love, for friendship. And this is a powerful story about friendship as well. The friendship between Ruth and Naomi, their commitment to one another, their willingness to take on life together, and the certainty that each of them, especially Ruth, would support the other are some of the most tender things in this book. Learning to be a companion, a support, an honest friend occurred the same way then as today.

This is also a story about suffering. Human suffering hasn't changed in three thousand years, either. Because we live in a fallen world, tragedy overtakes every life—heart-sickness, sorrow, brokenness, failure, deprivation, loss, and so on. How God uses suffering to build faith, how he makes life too hard for us to bear, and what he does about it by giving us himself, all remain the same. What did these people learn about faith? How did Ruth trust God amidst all the tragedy that took place? How did Naomi struggle to trust God? Naomi's honest frustration throughout this book is a great lesson-teacher. And how did Boaz, a man alone with much to offer someone, deal with his aloneness.

RISKY FAITH IN A CARING GOD

I want to conclude by mentioning three themes that we can take from this story, which you might keep in mind when you read it. First, this is a story about risky faith. Ruth, raised in Moab in a dark religion, heard of the God of Israel and risked everything trusting him. In contrast, if the ever-practical Naomi had a motto in life, it would be, "What you see is what you get." The only thing that could be trusted was what was measurable and observable. If life was good she was happy; if life was hard she was upset. After Ruth's husband died, Naomi, true to her instincts, said to Ruth, "Go back to your mother's house. Your husband has died, there is no hope for a husband in Israel. But against all that Ruth said, "I am going with you to be with you and your God." Hers was faith in what could not be seen, what could not be predicted. It was faith in God without any hedging of the bets.

The night after the two lay together and whispered on the threshing floor after the party, Boaz risked everything. He confronted the man who had first responsibility for that family and their land, and said, "If you will act as you ought to act, I will relinquish my hope of marrying Ruth." He risked everything to call another man to do what was right, and the man refused. Then God, who had brought them together, allowed them to marry as they longed to do. I hope that as you enjoy the study of this book, you'll be challenged by the courageous faith you find. The book of Ruth is a great commentary on this verse from the New Testament: "...We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). Ruth and Boaz bet everything on a God they could not see, because he was more trustworthy than the things that they could see.

But we who are reading their story, not living it, can see God everywhere. This is the second theme. There is a great line early in chapter 2. Naomi was frustrated and bitter. Ruth told her she was going to glean. They were poor, and God had provided gleaning for poor people. On her way, it says, "...She happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz...." It was no accident that she "happened" on the field of Boaz—the hand of God steered her there. The providence, care, and nearness of God were strengthening, directing, teaching, and providing for these people. Horrible things happened in Moab. The husbands all died, the poverty got worse, and yet that just opened the door for something greater. Every difficulty,

question, uncertainty, and broken heart became God's way of doing something better than would have happened otherwise. We can see his care before they could see it because we're reading the story knowing the end.

In chapter four, the women of the town who had been listening to Naomi, observing the love of Boaz and Ruth and the confidence they had in God, drew an important conclusion. Naomi was holding the child who had been born to Ruth and Boaz. She wanted tangible evidence of God's provision and could finally say, "The Almighty did something for me. Here is a boy who will grow to be a man who will take care of me in my old age." God had provided a male protector and we can assume Naomi was grateful.

But then the observers declared something beyond that: "...For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Consider what they were saying. "During all of your complaining, there beside you stood God's provision. You wanted a man to take care of you, God gave you a woman. You wanted a Jew to take care of you, God gave you a Moabite. She's better for you than seven sons would have been. Has God been absent? Has he had been treating you badly? Has he failed to provide for you? No, he was there the whole time, you just couldn't see it." And over and over again, this book makes the point: He is there, he does care. We feel that we're taking the greatest risks in the world to trust him, but underneath are the everlasting arms of God.

The final theme you might observe as you read Ruth is that everybody gets included. Ruth and Boaz are impressive. They are courageous and honest. They love God and each other. They're risk-takers; forthright, sweet-spirited people. But throughout the story Naomi wrestles with God, and she gets loved by him as much as they do. Naomi doesn't miss out, God finds a way to win her as well. All the townspeople looking on, who lived in the period of the judges, in the midst of lawlessness and faithlessness, dying in their sins, also recognize and believe God. The soul-sick people find that their appetite is whetted: "Maybe he can be trusted after all, it's worth making an attempt to find out." That's what this story can do for us-make us willing to try, to give us back a taste for spiritual things when once we were so "congested" that we couldn't taste anything.

So the challenge for you now is to read the book. Read it creatively, more than once, using different translations if you like. And a prayer to accompany your reading might be that your spiritual congestion would be relieved and that you would be given a sharper taste for life with God at the center.

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First Message

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