

Life-Giving Companions

Ruth 1:1-4:1

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Many of us are familiar with the story of Job. He was the man God chose to prove to Satan the faithfulness of God's followers.

God repeatedly "tested" Job, making his life extremely difficult, in order to show Satan how faithful he remains through it all.

Over the course of a year, many hardships unfolded. He lost all his possessions, his livestock, and even his ten children were killed when his house was collapsed by a mighty wind.

On top of all this, Job was struck by a plague of boils. But through it all, he remained faithful and never cursed God.

Now, I can imagine you're thinking, *"What does all this have to do with Ruth?"*

In many ways, the story of Naomi and Ruth is like the story of Job. These women, particularly Naomi, suffered more than they deserved.

None of what happened to them was their fault. In fact, Naomi's story began with hardship.

Plagued by a famine in her homeland, her husband decided to move his family into the hostile territory of Moab since it hadn't been affected. So it was that Naomi found herself in a foreign, hostile land.

Ruth 1:1, *"In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab."*

The move wasn't her choice, she just followed where her husband led. The Bible doesn't tell us how long they had lived there before her husband died, but I don't think it was too long.

Living in a foreign land, especially one hostile toward Israelites, was difficult in itself, but now, as a widow with no close friends, it was worse.

But her problems were bearable as she had two sons who could care for her. And as time passed, the two sons married.

Regardless that her daughters-in-law were Moabites, Naomi knew she would be cared for in her old age. So, life was okay for about 10 years, then both sons died.

Now, Naomi's life really goes downhill. She isn't just a widow in a foreign, hostile land, with no means of support and no friends, she has no immediate family.

All this unfolds right at the beginning of the story, so it's no surprise that Naomi begins to question the God of Israel. But, like Job, Naomi does not curse God, though she does believe that God has cursed her.

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Naomi probably thought there was nothing left to live for when she gets the news that the famine in her homeland had come to an end. Therefore, Naomi decided to head back to Bethlehem.

Now, knowing what it would be like for her daughters-in-law in Bethlehem, since there was no love lost between Israel and Moab, Naomi encouraged them to return to their own families and stay in Moab.

Ruth 1:7-8, *"With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back*

to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me."

Naomi had lost hope, and you can't blame her. Seeing no future for herself, she believed that there should be some hope for Ruth and Orpah to start life anew.

But Ruth wouldn't hear of it. As Orpah heads back, Ruth issued one of the most beautiful declarations of faithfulness in all Scripture.

Ruth 1:16-17, "But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

Who could argue with that? Naomi certainly doesn't, so she resigned herself to returning to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth.

Upon arrival in Bethlehem, Naomi continued to stew in her own misery, while Ruth, in her extreme faithfulness, got busy. But it wasn't easy. Ruth is now the foreigner in a hostile land, and a widow on top of that.

Though she lives in Naomi's house, they have no means of support because, being widows, they're the poorest of the poor.

So, Ruth heads to the fields to glean what the harvesters leave behind so that she and Naomi could at least have some bread to eat.

Now, Ruth could've had an entirely different life for herself. She might have remarried, had children, and lived happily ever after in Moab.

But instead, she devoted her life to Naomi, which required her to do back-breaking labor to keep them both alive. She did what she had to do because she was a committed and faithful woman.

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Obviously, she cared about her mother-in-law immensely. Who could have known that her efforts would pay dividends for her, too? This is the life of faith.

Sometimes our faithfulness means we suffer extreme trials, and sometimes our faithfulness means that God blesses us. The most important thing is that we remain faithful.

So, despite all their suffering and sadness, Ruth and Naomi were on the road to blessing because Boaz took notice of Ruth as she gleaned his field.

Now, Ruth was already being blessed, since her commitment to Naomi was recognized by the community resulting in her being accepted and not shunned.

We can discern this because, though Boaz is told that Ruth is a Moabite, it doesn't faze him. He doesn't view her as less of a person, just the opposite.

It was because of Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi that he makes special arrangements for her in his fields by ordering that Ruth was to be allowed to glean his field in peace.

In fact, the harvesters were also directed to give her water if she needed it and insure there was enough grain left for her to harvest.

Ruth 2:8-9, *"So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me."*

Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.”

Needless to say, this is a huge blessing for Ruth because she returns home with her arms full of grain.

Boaz’s blessing of Ruth and his acceptance of her into the Israelite community lifts Naomi’s spirits after so many months of despair and hopelessness. She could now pray and praise again.

Believing that God hadn’t given up on them, Naomi recognized an opportunity for Ruth and decides to initiate an event.

Perhaps, as a widow with no means, Naomi was trying to get positioned for a better future. Or maybe she wasn’t so concerned for herself but was trying to improve Ruth’s life.

We don’t know. Whatever the case, Naomi gives Ruth instructions for approaching Boaz in what could be misconstrued as “risqué.”

Many times, in the Bible, we see humans scheming instead of waiting on God, yet God uses their schemes to continue His purposes in the world.

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So, Naomi instructed Ruth to get all dressed up and to go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be that night.

She tells Ruth to wait until Boaz is drunk and lays down to sleep. At that time, Ruth was to uncover his feet and lay there.

Ruth 3:3-4, *“Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know*

you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down.”

Now, “uncovering the feet” of someone could mean a lot of different things. Some commentators interpret "uncovering his feet" and "lie down" as euphemisms for sexual activity.

But, for Naomi to encourage Ruth to commit an act of immorality is completely counter to what we know of her. So, Ruth agrees to do as Naomi instructed.

Ruth 3:5, *“I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered.”*

When Ruth said this, it was more than just a simple agreement. It was an acknowledgement that Ruth trusted Naomi that she wouldn't ask her to do something morally wrong.

It was an acknowledgement that Ruth trusted that Naomi's love for her wouldn't put her purity in undue risk.

It was an acknowledgement that Ruth trusted Naomi's judgment that this was the best way to approach the situation.

It was an acknowledgement that Ruth trusted Naomi's assessment of Boaz's character.

Ruth had faith, not only in Naomi, but in God. She didn't just believe there was a possibility that Boaz could be her redeemer; she believed enough to do something about it.

She had the kind of faith where, when you come to the end of everything you can see and feel, you take one more step.

So, Ruth does exactly as Naomi instructed, again showing the depth of her faithfulness and character.

Certainly, Ruth's approach of Boaz at the threshing floor is quite brash. One could easily assume that she was nothing better than a gold digger propositioning a wealthy man.

But this was not the case. Because, rather than propositioning Boaz, Ruth was proposing to him.

And Ruth makes it clear that she's proposing. She took the initiative, not only in approaching him, but in talking about marriage.

And the plan worked! What followed was another element of the unknown as Boaz goes out to find the next of kin.

He also has the village elders verify that his plan to farm Naomi's land and take Naomi's daughter-in-law as his wife would work.

We don't know if he was doing this because he felt a sense of obligation to his relative Naomi, or because he was really in love with Ruth.

Whatever the case, this was something Boaz really wanted, just as much as Naomi and Ruth. In the background, we can see that God was at work, too, making sure everything happened as He planned.

So, life began anew for both Naomi and Ruth. Ruth and Boaz marry, and later Ruth gives birth to a son, Obed.

Ruth 4:16-17, *"Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, 'Naomi has a son!' And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."*

Though the scripture says that “*Naomi has a son!*” The idea here was that this was God’s blessing on both of them.

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Conclusion

What we learn from this message today is that life goes on even when it seems as if everything has ended and all hope is lost.

Ruth committed herself to Naomi, and more importantly to Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God.

The result was that, after losing her husband and two sons, Naomi “had” a son again, even in her old age. And Ruth became the great-grandmother of the greatest king in all Israelite history.

That, I think, is the best part of this story. Because here’s what it says to me: God has a plan for his people.

It doesn’t matter if we are Israelite or Moabite, Northerners or Southerners, or black, or brown, or blue.

It doesn’t matter if we’ve messed up in the past, or even if we try to take matters into our own hands. If we’re faithful to God, God will be faithful to us.

It might not be easy, and it might not be pretty, but somehow God will work with us, and because God is God, amazing things will happen!